

Writing the Nation



A CONCISE INTRODUCTION TO AMERICAN LITERATURE
1865 TO PRESENT

Amy Berke, PhD | Robert R. Bleil, PhD | Jordan Cofer, PhD | Doug Davis, PhD

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***Adapted and revised for ENG 3320: American Literature, 1890 to Present
Hope Jennings, Ph.D., Wright State University***

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1 (UNIT 1): Modernist Poetry

| | | |
|------|---|----|
| 1.1 | Introduction | 6 |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Great War • Une Generation Perdue...(A Lost Generation) • A Modern Nation • Technology • Modernist Literature | |
| 1.2 | Marianne Moore, "Poetry" (1919) | 10 |
| 1.3 | Wallace Stevens, "Of Modern Poetry" (1942) | 12 |
| 1.4 | Ezra Pound, <i>Hugh Selwyn Mauberley</i> , II, IV, V (1920)* | 13 |
| 1.5 | H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), "Oread" (1914) & "The Garden" (1916)* | 15 |
| 1.6 | William Carlos Williams, "The Red Wheelbarrow" (1923) and "This Is Just to Say" (1934) | 18 |
| 1.7 | e. e. cummings, "in Just-" (1920) and "my sweet old etcetera" (1926) | 19 |
| 1.8 | Edna St. Vincent Millay, "First Fig" (1920) and "I, being born a woman" (1923) | 22 |
| 1.9 | Mina Loy, "Virgins plus Curtains minus Dots" (1914)* | 23 |
| 1.10 | T. S. Eliot, <i>The Waste Land</i> (1922)* | 27 |

Chapter 2 (UNIT 1): Harlem Renaissance

| | | |
|-----|--|----|
| 2.1 | Introduction | 39 |
| 2.2 | Langston Hughes, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" (1920) | 40 |
| 2.3 | Countee Cullen, "Heritage" (1925) | 41 |
| 2.4 | Margaret Walker, "For My People" (1942)* | 45 |
| 2.5 | Jean Toomer, <i>Cane</i> , "Portrait in Georgia" (1923) | 47 |
| 2.6 | Claude McKay, "The Harlem Dancer" (1917)* | 48 |
| 2.7 | Angelina Weld Grimké, "The Black Finger" and "Tenebris" (1920s)* | 49 |

Chapter 3 (UNIT 2): Postwar Drama

| | | |
|-----|--|----|
| 3.1 | Tennessee Williams, <i>A Streetcar Named Desire</i> (1947) | 50 |
|-----|--|----|

Chapter 4 (UNIT 2): Postwar Poetry

| | | |
|-----|--|----|
| 4.1 | Introduction | 51 |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Cold War, Vietnam, and the 1960s Counterculture • The Civil Rights and Feminist Movements | |

| | | |
|------|--|----|
| 4.2 | Theodore Roethke, “My Papa’s Waltz” (1942) | 53 |
| 4.3 | Sylvia Plath, “Lady Lazarus” (1965)* | 54 |
| 4.4 | Anne Sexton, “Sylvia’s Death” (1963)* | 58 |
| 4.5 | Denise Levertov, “Life at War” (1966)* | 61 |
| 4.6 | W.S. Merwin, “For a Coming Extinction” (1967)* | 63 |
| 4.7 | Maxine Kumin, “Woodchucks” (1972)* | 67 |
| 4.8 | Audre Lord, “Who Said It was Simple” (1973) and “A Litany for Survival” (1978)* | 69 |
| 4.9 | Judy Grahn, “I Have Come to Claim Marilyn Monroe’s Body” (1971)* | 71 |
| 4.10 | Adrienne Rich, “Diving into the Wreck” (1973) | |
| 4.11 | Louise Glück, “Circe’s Torment” and “Siren” (1986)* | 74 |

Chapter 5 (UNIT 3): Postmodern Fiction

| | | |
|-----|---|----|
| 5.1 | Vladimir Nabokov, <i>Lolita</i> (1955)* | 77 |
|-----|---|----|

Chapter 6 (UNIT 4): Contemporary African American Literature

| | | |
|-----|---|----|
| 6.1 | Toni Morrison, <i>Paradise</i> (1997)* | 82 |
| 6.2 | Colson Whitehead, <i>The Underground Railroad</i> (2016)* | 84 |

| | | |
|-----------------|--|----|
| Glossary | | 86 |
|-----------------|--|----|

Chapter 1 (UNIT 1): Modernist Poetry (1914—1945)

1.1 Introduction

The biggest driver for Modernism was **World War I**, also known as the Great War, and the social and political turmoil that ensued. Much of the innovative work of the Modernist period seemed to follow writer **Ezra Pound**'s credo of "Make It New!" Whether it was technology, art, architecture, or poetry, Modernism sought to reinvent the world. Uninhibited by the past, the Modernist era redefined America's political, religious, economic, and social values. From areas of women's suffrage to the invention of the assembly line, from Harlem to the Deep South, Modernism was a time of social upheaval, extraordinary growth, and accelerated change for America.

World War I lasted from 1914-1918, and was largely a European conflict with Great Britain, France, Russia, and Italy serving as the pillars of the Allied Forces, and Germany and Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire anchoring the Central powers. Yet it brought turbulent changes to the entire world, America included. Although America did not officially enter the war effort until 1917, many young men already volunteered before then to fight with other detachments. This war was the first global war and, as the world evolved, so did warfare. Additionally, this war was the first fully industrialized war, featuring shelling, machine guns, mustard gas, and several other kinds of advanced weaponry.

Indeed, this war was the likes of which no one had ever seen. As such, it was a war of attrition, with over 30 million casualties. Never before in the history of civilization had there been such a large and full-scale military affair. Although in 1918, the Armistice signaled the end to World War I, many tensions and hostilities remained, especially among the combatants who felt disillusioned and used by their country. It's no coincidence that in 1919, just one year later, riots broke out across the United States. After the dust settled, one thing was clear: the world had changed permanently; this change would be at the heart of Modernist literature and art.

Of course, World War I did not end European conflict; tension began to arise when Adolf Hitler came to power in the 1930s and bristled under Germany's heavy sanctions imposed by the Armistice. Hitler's rise in Germany would lead to World War II, which the United States tried to avoid using isolationist policies. However, Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor (December 7, 1941) served as the catalyst for America's entrance into World War II. This period between the two wars marks an important time in American life and culture. During this time, America grew and matured, largely in reaction to these events that unified the nation against common enemies. This unprecedented American growth included growth from immigration, industrialization, technological developments, and the development of the modern cities.

One generation Perdue...(a lost generation): If the mantra of Modernism was Pound's "Make it New," then the defining characteristic for the generation comes from Gertrude Stein's comment to young Ernest Hemingway that you are all "one generation perdue" (you all are a lost generation). With the economy at an all-time high—due to the increased industrial manufacturing and development of so many new industries—came an increase in wealth in America; indeed, the Modernist period is characterized by the boom of a growing economy before the bust of the Great Depression. While overall wealth increased, dissatisfaction with America also increased and a

growing number of young people, artists and veterans alike lived as expatriates outside the country—largely taking up residence in France and Spain. Most notable among these expatriates were writers **T. S. Eliot**, **Ezra Pound**, **Hilda Doolittle (H.D.)**, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Ernest Hemingway. This movement is depicted in Hemingway's novel, *The Sun Also Rises*.

A Modern Nation: The industrial revolution and the meteoric rise of factories helped shift the nation's economy from its agricultural roots to an industry based (Fordist) economy. World War I (which began in 1914) along with America's entrance into the war (1917) put pressure on all of the citizens to ration goods and supplies. To meet demand, more factories began to experiment with mass production. This boom led to more jobs and a stronger economy, often referred to as the Boom years. Furthermore, while live music led to the prevalence of nightclubs, Prohibition created an underground industry of bootlegging to supply alcohol for these entertainment and music venues. This instant wealth led to a greater population of the newly rich and encouraged growth throughout the country. Often called "The Jazz Age," this era of wealth was written about by many different Modernists, but perhaps made most famous by F. Scott Fitzgerald. However, the Boom years did not last forever.

This age of prosperity came to a sudden halt in October 1929, when the sudden stock market collapse led to the Great Depression. The economic downturn led to more than 10,000 banks shutting down and more than 15 million workers becoming unemployed. Worse still, a series of droughts in the early 1930s, known as the "Dust Bowl," left 500,000 people homeless, as many of these families moved to California, looking for work. The Great Depression became a major literary theme chronicled, most notably, by John Steinbeck in his novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*. The election of Franklin Roosevelt (1932) ushered in the age of "The New Deal." During the New Deal era, Roosevelt created the Works Progress Administration (WPA) which used Federal funds to put more people to work, building America's infrastructure. The WPA was responsible for roads, various public buildings, and other projects, most notably the Hoover Dam, using Federal funds. The WPA provided employment for millions, including writers and artists who were sponsored by the Federal Writers' Project. James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, featuring the photography of Walker Evans, was an eye-opening book that captured the extent of New Deal poverty in the American South. At the same time, more and more people started migrating out of small rural agricultural areas into cities.

Most notable among this time period is the Great Migration, during which African Americans left the South to escape poverty and Jim Crow laws and moved to larger cities like Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, Philadelphia, and New York. The Great Migration included as many as 1.5 million African Americans and represents the greatest population shift in American history. These cultural and population shifts, along with the freedom of transportation, caused cultural cross-pollination, as people brought their old customs to new places. These shifts helped spark regional cultural revolutions, such as the Harlem Renaissance in New York—which brought many important African-American artists to the forefront and is captured in works like Zora Neal Huston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* or **Jean Toomer's Cane**—as well the Southern Literary Renaissance, also referred to by Southern Writers as the Southern Literary Renaissance—which foregrounded the creativity of the South and brought authors like William Faulkner and **Tennessee Williams** to national prominence.

Technology: New technologies were changing the face of modern life. The Brooklyn Bridge, completed in 1883, was a giant suspension bridge which connected Brooklyn with Manhattan. Although it pre-dates Modernism, it was seen as one of America's greatest technological achievements and was the subject of Hart Crane's famous Modernist poem *The Bridge*. The invention of the automobile by inventors like Henry Ford and the development of the assembly line in the early 1920s not only created an industry, but also spurred investments in America's infrastructure, that is, its roads, highways. Suddenly, all of America was connected and personal travel was more readily available. The mass production of phonographs, projection reels, and telephones made these technologies more accessible to the public and allowed for more recording, making mass culture possible. The same could be said about the publishing industry, which flourished during this time. The paperback book made books more affordable, and the development of Book-of-the-Month clubs and subscription reading programs allowed for mass audiences, giving rise to the modern day "best seller." The affordability of magazines also made them a popular venue for many writers, while many famous Modernist writers, such as **Ezra Pound**, held editorial positions for magazines, and literary magazines, such as *The Dial*, became popular venues for Modernist writers to publish.

Modernist Literature: The term Modernism as a literary term is largely used as a catchall for a global movement that was centered in the United States and Europe, for literature written during the two wars, which is said to be the first industrialized modern period. In another sense, Modernism refers to the general theme: much of the literature of the period is written in reaction to these accelerated times. After World War I, many writers felt betrayed by the United States, but even more than that, there was a general feeling of change, of progress, of questioning the ways of the past. Throughout the art of this time period, whether it is painting, sculpture, poetry, fiction, or non-fiction, all question the truths of the past, all question the status quo. Largely, this attitude goes hand-in-hand with the disaffection with politics caused by World War I.

Poetry: There is no single style that would encompass all of Modernist poetry; rather, a lot of Modernist poetry could be separated as High Modernism and Low Modernism. These terms are not meant to serve as an aesthetic judgment about the quality of the work, but rather help us understand the range of experimentation occurring during this period. **High Modernism** features poets who are much more formal, such as **T. S. Eliot**, and who look at the modern era as a period of loss, in some ways, looking at how much America has changed and fearing that the change might be for the worse. Essentially, in high modernist works, the authors realize that society has shifted so much, it will never be possible to return to the old ways, so they often represent the world as fragmented, disjointed, or chaotic. High Modernist poetry also maintains a traditional structure and form and often contains explicit allusions to history, myth, or religion. **Low Modernism** is much less formal, experimenting with form. The poetry of **William Carlos Williams**, the doctor turned poet, is a great example of Low Modernism. His poetry—like "This is Just to Say" and "The Red Wheelbarrow"—often plays with the traditional structure of a poem. These writers tend to be so different that first-time readers often questioned whether these works—for instance, Williams's "This is Just to Say" and **e. e. cummings's** "In Just"—are poems. **Ezra Pound** did not even consider himself a poet; rather, in his essay, "A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste," he refers to himself as an *imagiste*, or one who creates images.

Experimentation in Modernist poetry (and prose) inspired writers to challenge form, style, and content, that is, what you could or could not write about. **Mina Loy** often wrote both frankly and elliptically about women's sexuality, her poems notably absent of punctuation and often filled with blank white space. **Edna St. Vincent Millay** transformed the sonnet tradition by subverting romantic conventions and stereotypes about women's desires. **Jean Toomer's** *Cane* combined poetry, prose, and drama in one strange and beautiful book, foregrounding the dangerous racial politics of the time. Modernist poetry was much more than just experimentation, though, in that it also introduced new subject matter. Writers no longer felt the need to veil their opinions; instead, many were explicit in their political critiques. The Great Depression gave rise to Communism among many artists, while the Women's Suffrage Movement highlighted early feminism. Furthermore, the widespread distribution of easily affordable magazines meant that these writers were reaching a wider audience with a more radical message.

Drama: The Modernist period was perhaps the birth of the American playwright. Before Modernism, theater consisted of largely vaudeville or productions of European works. However, the success of Eugene O'Neil paved the way for several other successful American playwrights, such as Arthur Miller and **Tennessee Williams**. Although theirs was a time of great change, the common thread that ties the Modernist writers together—whether they write poetry, prose, or drama—is the techniques they invented. Writers such as Faulkner, whose novel *The Sound and the Fury* offered an entirely new way to narrate a book, or **Langston Hughes**, whose poetry blended music and verse, developed entirely new ways of telling a story. Modernist writers radically rejected previous standards in an attempt to “**make it new**” and, in the process, changed the course of literary history.

1.2 Marianne Moore (1887 - 1972)



If Robert Frost's poems demonstrate a continuing fascination with decay, it may be said that Marianne Moore's poetry reveals an equally compelling fascination with development. Like Dickinson and Whitman in the previous century, Moore was a compulsive editor and revisionist who apparently struggled over the publication of each of her poems. Like Dickinson, she wished to see her poems laid out exactly as she wished, but as a professional, rather than an amateur poet, she seized upon each opportunity for publication as a chance for revision. Thus, like with Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, it is difficult to call any of Moore's poems finished. Each time they were printed anew, she revised them. In this way, Moore's poetry works on a number of textual levels. Like Dickinson, Moore expressed hesitation at the appearance of her published work, but like her Modernist contemporaries, she embraced the opportunities that twentieth-century publishing, and the existence of numerous "little magazines," offered.

Moore's first published poems appeared in these "little magazines," the literary and artistic journals of the early twentieth century, around 1915, and her work was widely praised by the literary gatekeepers of the day, including Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot. But it was her first collection of twenty-four entries, *Poems*, published without her knowledge in July 1921, that made her name widely known in the literary world. By the time that Moore herself produced a collection of poems, 1924's *Observations*, she was beginning to develop a reputation as a "poet's poet" that was only strengthened by winning the Dial prize in 1925. After winning the prize in 1925, Moore became editor of the Dial, a post that she held for the next four years. "Poetry," the selection that follows, is a manifesto for Modernism, a demonstration of Moore's command of both technique and artistry, and an instruction manual. As a manifesto, "Poetry" is both disdainful of the rigid forms that dominated most poetry—what Moore calls, "this fiddle,"—and celebratory of the experience of reading poetry. The experience of reading poetry, she argues, must yield an understanding of "imaginary gardens with real toads in them," and not be merely sites for "high-sounding," but "unintelligible," attempts at communication.

Thus poetry, Moore argues, must be both precise and genuine. Moore demonstrates both precision and authenticity throughout the poem by using concrete, rather than traditionally poetic, language and by avoiding many of our expectations about poetry. Not only does Moore's poetry fail to rhyme, but she also rejects Dickinson's rigid hymnody, eschews Whitman's free verse, and ignore Frost's blank verse in favor of poetry that shares more of its syntax with prose and the spoken word than it does with traditional poetic forms. In place of lines and stanzas, Moore forces us to confront her poetry as a single unit where the expression begins with the first capital "I," and concludes with a single period at the end of the last line. Entangled in this extended expression, Moore guides the reader to a new understanding of poetry that reminds readers of Whitman's *Song of Myself* while it advocates not for a song in the traditional sense but for the importance of ordinary human speech. While reading "Poetry," careful readers should take note of the differences between Moore's monologue, in which no response is required from the reader, and the dramatic monologues of Frost whose speaker is always questioning.

“Poetry” (1919)

I too, dislike it: there are things that are important beyond
all this fiddle.

Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one
discovers that there is in
it after all, a place for the genuine.
Hands that can grasp, eyes
that can dilate, hair that can rise
if it must, these things are important not because a
high-sounding interpretation can be put upon them but because
they are
useful; when they become so derivative as to become
unintelligible, the
same thing may be said for all of us—that we
do not admire what
we cannot understand. The bat,
holding on upside down or in quest of something to
eat, elephants pushing, a wild horse taking a roll, a tireless
wolf under
a tree, the immovable critic twinkling his skin like a horse
that feels a flea, the base-
ball fan, the statistician—case after case
could be cited did
one wish it; nor is it valid
to discriminate against “business documents and
school-books”; all these phenomena are important. One must
make a distinction
however: when dragged into prominence by half poets,
the result is not poetry,
nor till the autocrats among us can be
“literalists of
the imagination”—above
insolence and triviality and can present
for inspection, imaginary gardens with real toads in them,
shall we have
it. In the meantime, if you demand on the one hand, in defiance of their opinion—
the raw material of poetry in
all its rawness, and
that which is on the other hand,
genuine, then you are interested in poetry.

From *Others for 1919: An Anthology of the New Verse*, edited by Alfred Kreymborg.

Reading and Review Questions

1. How does the presentation of Moore’s poem—the ragged lines, the uneven breaks—shape our understanding of the poem?

1.3 Wallace Stevens (1879 - 1955)



Wallace Stevens's reputation as an American poet has undergone something of a transformation over the sixty years since his death in the middle of the twentieth century. Celebrated during his lifetime for his imagery and for his attempts to unite the real world with the imagination, Stevens was also the target of frequent criticism for both the ordinary subjects of his early poetry and for the abstractness of his later work. Those who celebrate Stevens's work often point to this dichotomy, between the world of commerce and the world of the mind, as evidence of Stevens's particularly American upbringing. Unlike many of his generation, Stevens did not shy from commerce or industry in pursuit of his art; instead, he embraced both halves of himself by working during the day as a lawyer and insurance company executive and by writing poetry in the evenings and on vacation. While many modernist poets considered it a badge of honor to support themselves solely through their writings, Stevens saw no conflict in pursuing both the world of real things and the flights of the imagination. These were the stuff of poetry, not of conflict. Stevens mixed the ordinary and the imaginary in poems that are technically sophisticated while accessible to a wider audience. In the much-quoted "Of Modern Poetry" (1942), which has become an iconic twentieth-century poem, Stevens makes his own argument for poetry that picks up on Marianne Moore's call for more precise language that is found in her own poem, "Poetry" (1921). Stevens, like Moore, argues that a poem "has to be living" (7), and therefore poetry must embrace the simple language of ordinary things in order for the imagination to create images. Yet, Stevens cautions poets and readers that modern poetry must not seek merely to represent an image; it must also connect to the imagination in order for it to succeed.

"Of Modern Poetry" (1942)

The poem of the mind in the act of finding
 What will suffice. It has not always had
 To find: the scene was set; it repeated what
 Was in the script.

Then the theatre was changed
 To something else. Its past was a souvenir.

It has to be living, to learn the speech of the place.
 It has to face the men of the time and to meet
 The women of the time. It has to think about war
 And it has to find what will suffice. It has
 To construct a new stage. It has to be on that stage
 And, like an insatiable actor, slowly and
 With meditation, speak words that in the ear,
 In the delicatest ear of the mind, repeat,
 Exactly, that which it wants to hear, at the sound
 Of which, an invisible audience listens,
 Not to the play, but to itself, expressed
 In an emotion as of two people, as of two

Emotions becoming one. The actor is
 A metaphysician in the dark, twanging
 An instrument, twanging a wiry string that gives
 Sounds passing through sudden rightnesses, wholly
 Containing the mind, below which it cannot descend,
 Beyond which it has no will to rise.

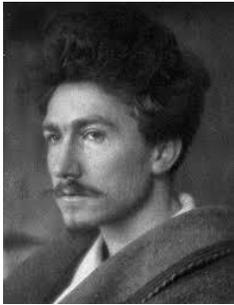
It must
 Be the finding of a satisfaction, and may
 Be of a man skating, a woman dancing, a woman
 Combing. The poem of the act of the mind.

Wallace Stevens, "Of Modern Poetry" from *Collected Poems*. Copyright 1923, 1951, 1954 by Wallace Stevens.

Reading and Review Questions

1. How does Stevens's use of everyday language and situations shape the subjects of his poetry? Compare Stevens's "Of Modern Poetry" to Marianne Moore's "Poetry." How do these authors understand the roles and responsibilities of poets?

1.4 Ezra Pound (1885 - 1972)



As brilliant as he was controversial, Ezra Pound more than any other single poet or editor shaped modernist poetry into the forms you find in this chapter. Pound grew up in Philadelphia and attended the University of Pennsylvania, where he studied world languages and became friends with fellow poets **Hilda Doolittle (H. D.)** and **William Carlos Williams**. Pound moved to London in 1908, working as a teacher, book reviewer, and secretary to William Butler Yeats. The energetic and prolific Pound soon became a force within London's literary scene, urging his fellow poets to break from poetic tradition and, as he famously wrote, "**make it new.**" After World War I, Pound became disillusioned with free-market democratic society, blaming it for both the immediate war and the general decline of civilization. He moved to Italy and became enamored with Italy's fascist government, recording hundreds of pro-fascist radio programs for Rome Radio that were broadcast to allied troops. After the war, Pound was arrested for treason, found mentally unfit, and incarcerated in Washington, D.C.'s Saint Elizabeth's Hospital until 1958, when his fellow poets successfully lobbied to have him freed. Pound influenced modernist literature in two ways: by championing and editing numerous writers such as **H. D.**, Robert Frost, James Joyce, Ernest Hemingway, and **T. S. Eliot** (whose *The Waste Land* he substantially revised); and by campaigning for the Imagist and Vorticist poetic movements. "In a Station of the Metro" (**see below**) is a perfect example of an Imagist poem. The poem is based on an experience Pound had of stepping off a train in Paris's underground Metro. As he writes in his essay, "From Vorticism," he "saw suddenly a beautiful face, and then another and another...and I tried all that day to find words for what this had meant to me..." It took Pound an entire year to find those words. His first draft of the poem was thirty lines long. His second draft was fifteen lines long. Still unable to express the emotion he felt that day, Pound continued to cut verbiage from the poem until it came closer in form to a Japanese haiku than a traditional Western lyric. The final two-line poem exemplifies Pound's three criteria for an Imagist poem: that the poet must treat things directly; eliminate unnecessary words; and use rhythm musically, not mechanically.

In a Station of the Metro

The apparition of these faces in the crowd:
Petals on a wet, black bough.

Hugh Selwyn Mauberley (1920) is a longer poem by Pound. It has been regarded as a turning point in his career (by F.R. Leavis and others), and its completion was swiftly followed by his departure from England. The name and personality of the titular subject is reminiscent of T. S. Eliot's main character in *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*. The poem comprises eighteen short poems grouped into two sections. The first is an autobiography of Pound himself and the selections here speak not only to his views on imagism but places this work firmly as a response to the carnage of World War I and the seeming impossibility of art to salvage anything from its wreckage.

Hugh Selwyn Mauberley [Part I] (1920)

II

The age demanded an image
Of its accelerated grimace,
Something for the modern stage,
Not, at any rate, an Attic grace;

Not, not certainly, the obscure reveries
Of the inward gaze;
Better mendacities
Than the classics in paraphrase!

The “age demanded” chiefly a mould in plaster,
Made with no loss of time,
A prose kinema, not, not assuredly, alabaster
Or the “sculpture” of rhyme.

IV

These fought, in any case,
and some believing, pro domo, in any case ...

Some quick to arm,
some for adventure,
some from fear of weakness,
some from fear of censure,
some for love of slaughter, in imagination,
learning later ...

some in fear, learning love of slaughter;
Died some pro patria, non dulce non et decor” ...

walked eye-deep in hell
believing in old men’s lies, then unbelieving

came home, home to a lie,
 home to many deceits,
 home to old lies and new infamy;

usury age-old and age-thick
 and liars in public places.

Daring as never before, wastage as never before.
 Young blood and high blood,
 Fair cheeks, and fine bodies;

fortitude as never before

frankness as never before,
 disillusion as never told in the old days,
 hysterias, trench confessions,
 laughter out of dead bellies.

V

There died a myriad,
 And of the best, among them,
 For an old bitch gone in the teeth,
 For a botched civilization.

Charm, smiling at the good mouth,
 Quick eyes gone under earth's lid,

For two gross of broken statues,
 For a few thousand battered books.

1.5 H.D. (Hilda Doolittle) (1886 - 1961)



H.D.'s life and work recapitulate the central themes of literary modernism: the emergence from Victorian norms and certainties, the entry into an age characterized by rapid technological change and the violence of two great wars, and the development of literary modes which reflected the disintegration of traditional symbolic systems and the mythmaking quest for new meanings. H.D.'s oeuvre spans five decades of the 20th century, 1911-1961, and incorporates work in a variety of genres. She is known primarily as a poet, but she also wrote novels, memoirs, and essays and did a number of translations from the Greek. Her work is consistently innovative and experimental, both reflecting and contributing to the avant-garde milieu that dominated the arts in London and Paris until the end of World War II. Immersed for decades in the intellectual crosscurrents of modernism, psychoanalysis, syncretist mythologies, and feminism, H.D. created

a unique voice and vision that sought to bring meaning to the fragmented shards of a war-torn culture. The development of H.D.'s increasingly complex and resonant texts is best understood when placed in the context of other important modernists, many of whom she knew intimately and all of whom she read avidly—especially poets such as **Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore, Wallace Stevens**, and novelists such as **D.H. Lawrence**, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and Djuna Barnes. Within this modernist tradition, H.D.'s particular emphasis grew out of her perspective as a woman regarding the intersections of public events and private lives in the aftermath of World War I. Love and war, birth and death are the central concerns of her work, in which she reconstituted gender, language, and myth to serve her search for the underlying patterns ordering and uniting consciousness and culture.

H.D.'s most frequently anthologized poem, “*Oread*,” which was first published in 1914, demonstrates why poets regarded her as the quintessential imagist. H.D.'s ability to concentrate language, construct a musical line, and project intensity through the crystalline image gave poetic flesh to imagist doctrine. It is probably more accurate to say that imagist doctrine was developed to describe the poetry she wrote. H.D.'s perfection as an imagist poet, however, has tended to obscure what was unique in her early poetry, qualities that reflected her American background, encoded her gender-related attempts to escape from the confines of Victorian femininity, and prefigured the prophetic voice of her work in the 1940s and 1950s. Pound was no doubt correct in writing that H.D.'s poems were as concrete and direct as those of the Greeks. *Sea Garden*, her first volume, published in 1916, evokes a generalized Greek landscape, with its naming of various gods and shrines. However, this landscape of rocky shore, forest, and flowers came not from Greece, as her readers often assumed, but from her American childhood, as she later told Norman Holmes Pearson, the Yale professor who became her close friend, adviser, and literary executor in the 1940s and 1950s. The natural world of *Sea Garden* is not itself the subject of any given poem, as objects often are in Williams's imagist poems. ... Rather, nature serves as the vehicle that objectifies consciousness in H.D.'s early work. Creating a modernist version of American transcendentalism, for which “nature is a symbol of spirit,” H.D. uses the natural world to explore the subjectivities of consciousness. Taken as a whole, *Sea Garden* is a volume that indirectly explores the unnamed, impersonal identity of the poet. The poet appears before the reader enigmatically hidden behind initials. As disembodied as the *Sea Garden* poems appear, they are nonetheless poems about identity. Removed from the confines of respectability, the natural world of *Sea Garden* is a kind of pastoral realm imaginatively existing outside culture, what Louis Martz aptly called “borderline.” ... As coded lyrics about the female self, [H.D.'s early poems might be read as] an expression of the poet's simultaneous vulnerability as a woman, rejection of conventional femininity, and defiant celebration of her difference. ~ *Poetry Foundation*

“Oread” (1914)

Whirl up, sea—
whirl your pointed pines,
splash your great pines
on our rocks,
hurl your green over us,
cover us with your pools of fir.

“The Garden” (1916)**I**

You are clear
 O rose, cut in rock,
 hard as the descent of hail.

I could scrape the colour
 from the petals
 like spilt dye from a rock.

If I could break you
 I could break a tree.

If I could stir
 I could break a tree—
 I could break you.

II

O wind, rend open the heat,
 cut apart the heat,
 rend it to tatters.

Fruit cannot drop
 through this thick air—
 fruit cannot fall into heat
 that presses up and blunts
 the points of pears
 and rounds the grapes.

Cut the heat—
 plough through it,
 turning it on either side
 of your path.

Reading & Review Questions

1. In Greek mythology, the oread is described as a nymph of mountains and hills. What can we say about the imagery that H.D. is using throughout her poem, “Oread”?
2. In “The Garden,” what qualities of the rock does the speaker seem to admire? Why? What kinds of power does the rock symbolize?

1.6 William Carlos Williams (1883 - 1963)



Affectionately known as “the good doctor,” the prolific William Carlos Williams published dozens of works of literature in his lifetime, including novels, plays, essay and poetry collections, and an autobiography. Born in Rutherford, New Jersey, in 1883, Williams attended medical school at the University of Pennsylvania, where he met fellow poets **Hilda Doolittle (H. D.)** and **Ezra Pound**. Soon after graduating, Williams settled back home in Rutherford with his wife and family to run a medical practice, delivering over 2000 babies during his lifelong career as a pediatrician. While establishing himself as a successful neighborhood doctor, Williams also established himself as an influential voice in New York City’s Modernist art scene, befriending writers such as **Wallace Stevens** and **Marianne Moore** and experimental painters such as Marcel Duchamp. In 1913, the International Exhibition of Modern Art at New York City’s 69th Regiment Armory introduced Americans to radical new styles of painting such as Cubism and Fauvism. Inspired by these new forms of visual art, Williams sought to craft a similarly new form of poetry for modern America. Like the modern painters, Williams focuses on the details of urban life through shifting perspectives and juxtaposed images. To both free his poetry from the restrictions of traditional verse forms and save it from the anarchy of free verse, Williams devised a new poetic rhythm called “the variable foot” that he used to structure his poems organically according to the rhythms of everyday American speech. At a time when many American modernist authors were moving to Europe to find artistic inspiration, Williams found inspiration in his native New Jersey, taking its small cities and working people as the subjects for his poetry. Stylistically, Williams’s poetry is rooted in the **Imagism** championed by his friend Ezra Pound, as evidenced by the short imagist poem, “The Red Wheelbarrow.” Williams’s insistence on writing about the particular led him to differ from poets such as **Pound** and **Eliot**, who eventually sought to make modern poetry more universal by making it more international, infusing it with different cultures and languages. Williams chose instead to write most of his poems—to use the title of one of his essay collections—“in the American grain,” finding the universal in the everyday experiences of his native land. Williams often combines the linguistic economy of an Imagist poet with the shifts in perspective of a Cubist painter, presenting multiple perspectives.

“The Red Wheelbarrow” (1923)

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens

“This Is Just to Say” (1934)

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox

and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast

Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold

Reading and Review Questions

1. In his poem *Paterson*, Williams famously writes that there are “no ideas but in things.” What ideas do you find in “The Red Wheelbarrow”?
2. Explore the shifting perspectives in “This Is Just to Say.” How does the idea of the plums change over the poem’s course?

1.7 e. e. cummings (1894 - 1962)

Like a number of the modernist poets, e. e. cummings came from a family of teachers and ministers. But while many of his contemporaries were active members of the artistic communities of New York, Boston, and Philadelphia, cummings was a more solitary figure whose poetry and politics tended toward the everyday and the common. This is not to say that cummings was a passive observer of the world around him: while serving overseas during World War I, cummings and a friend were held by the French on charges that their letters home were derisive of authority and of the general war effort. At home in New York, however, cummings seems to have avoided the style of poetry and pronouncements that made his contemporaries like Pound, Williams, Moore, and Stevens into vanguards of Modernist poetry. Nonetheless, contemporary readers are often startled by the appearance of cummings’s poetry on the printed page. Eschewing capitalization, punctuation, and standard verse forms, cummings’s works take full advantage of the printed page to present poems that are often better suited to private reading than public performance. Where the lack of punctuation and capitalization may disarm readers more accustomed to being told how to vocalize a poem, cummings’s verses are presented without a beginning or an ending so as to allow the reader to move through a collection of cummings’s verse in a way that befits the private reading experience. Unusual in its shape and punctuation, cummings’s poetry is linked to the same rhythms of life that have captivated poets from Chaucer to Eliot.

“in Just-” (1920)

in Just-
 spring when the world is mud-
 luscious the little
 lame balloonman

whistles far and wee

and eddieandbill come
 running from marbles and
 piracies and it's
 spring

when the world is puddle-wonderful

the queer
 old balloonman whistles
 far and wee
 and bettyandisbel come dancing

from hop-scotch and jump-rope and

it's
 spring
 and

the

goat-footed

balloonMan whistles
 far
 and
 wee

“my sweet old etcetera” (1926)

my sweet old etcetera
 aunt lucy during the recent

war could and what
 is more did tell you just
 what everybody was fighting

for,
 my sister

isabel created hundreds
 (and
 hundreds)of socks not to
 mention shirts fleaproof earwarmers

etcetera wrists etcetera, my
 mother hoped that

i would die etcetera
 bravely of course my father used
 to become hoarse talking about how it was
 a privilege and if only he
 could meanwhile my

self etcetera lay quietly
 in the deep mud et

cetera
 (dreaming,
 et
 cetera, of
 Your smile
 eyes knees and of your Etcetera)

Reading and Review Questions

1. How does cummings’s resistance to punctuation shape your understanding of this poem? Can you determine an internal structure in the poem that replaces the need for standard punctuation?
2. How does cummings’s poetry compare to other iconic modernist poets like Ezra Pound or Marianne Moore? Is cummings’s rejection of punctuation and traditional forms part of the American quality of his poetry?
3. Analyze the ways in which cummings uses hyphenation and line breaks in “in Just-” and “my sweet old etcetera” to create a sense of overlapping time.

1.8 Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892 – 1950)



When the first of our selections from Edna St. Vincent Millay, “First Fig,” was published in *Poetry* in October 1918, the twenty-six-year-old author was already a published poet and a rising figure in the Greenwich Village literary scene. Yet “First Fig,” and the four other lyrics that appeared alongside it in that issue, are notable because they demonstrate—in a total of just twenty lines—both Millay’s mastery of the lyric form and her determined frankness. In this way, Millay represents both a continuation of poetic traditions and a new approach to appropriate subject matter for women’s poetry. Like many female poets of the early part of the twentieth century, Millay appears at once to straddle two worlds:

on one hand her poetry shows great technical skill, which permits her entry into the ranks of so-called serious poets, while on the other hand, her verses show a lightness, a frankness, and a freshness from which a poet like Emily Dickinson would retreat. For Millay and other female poets, as for their African-American contemporaries like Countee Cullen, it was often necessary to embrace traditional poetic forms even as their subject matter was decidedly modern.

A gifted playwright as well as a poet, Millay was a member of the experimental theatre group, the Provincetown Players, for whom she frequently wrote while also composing several books of poetry. As a sometime expatriate in the 1920s, Millay liberally combined traditional poetic forms and contemporary subjects in her verse, prose, and drama. The winner of the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1923, for *The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver*, Millay was both a critically and a commercially successful writer. “First Fig,” the opening lyric in a group known as *Figs from Thistles*, is familiar to many readers who encountered it in high school, where it is often included as a tool for teaching about scansion and prosody. Composed of just four lines that alternate between iambic pentameter and iambic tetrameter, and featuring a strong end-rhyme, “First Fig” is often a gateway work in modernist poetry because it mimics forms with which readers are already comfortable. Yet the poem quickly challenges our expectations by celebrating excess: “My candle burns at both ends,” for example, and then acknowledging the speaker’s foes as readily as the speaker’s friends. These elements combined with the exclamatory, “It gives a lovely light!” in the last line transport the imagery from the usual one of decay into a celebration. The second selection from Millay, “I, being born a woman” (1923), provides additional evidence of the poet’s technical skills. A sonnet in the Petrarchan tradition, this poem ironically plays with the traditional gendered role of the “cruel mistress.” The first-person speaker of the sonnet addresses a potential lover. She confesses to an intense physical attraction but denies the possibility of any emotional or intellectual connection. By positioning the woman as subject, not object, Millay simultaneously fulfills and subverts the conventions of the sonnet (*Wikipedia*).

“First Fig” (1920)

My candle burns at both ends;
It will not last the night;
But ah, my foes, and oh, my friends—
It gives a lovely light!

“I, being born a woman and distressed” (1923)

I, being born a woman and distressed
 By all the needs and notions of my kind,
 Am urged by your propinquity to find
 Your person fair, and feel a certain zest
 To bear your body's weight upon my breast:
 So subtly is the fume of life designed,
 To clarify the pulse and cloud the mind,
 And leave me once again undone, possessed.
 Think not for this, however, the poor treason
 Of my stout blood against my staggering brain,
 I shall remember you with love, or season
 My scorn with pity, —let me make it plain:
 I find this frenzy insufficient reason
 For conversation when we meet again

Reading and Review Questions

1. How does Millay's choice of the sonnet form distinguish her work from that of other Modernists such as Eliot, Moore, Stevens, and Williams? Also, why do writers like Millay experiment with the sonnet form?
2. Millay is one of the first American poets to write candidly about female sexuality. How does Millay's poetry reflect the attitudes of Modernism in relation to female sexuality?

1.9 Mina Loy (1882 – 1966)



Mina Loy, poet and painter, was a charter member of the generation that—beginning in 1912 with the founding of *Poetry* magazine—launched the modernist revolution in poetry in the United States. Loy was too radical for *Poetry's* editor Harriet Monroe, who published her poetry only in a review article, but the generation's more innovative members admired her defiant honesty of subject and applauded the new directions she advanced for poetry. Most recognition came to Loy in the decade 1914-1925; thereafter she gave less attention to poetry and withdrew from the literary scene except for infrequent little magazine publications. In their memoirs Loy's contemporaries made a legend of her beauty and personal tragedy; literary historians occasionally remembered her as an exotic fringe figure of the American and Dada avant-gardes. Then in the 1940s and 1950s began the rediscovery of Mina Loy by the radical current of high modernism, and in the succeeding decades feminist poets and critics recognized in Loy a very contemporary ancestor.

Although numbered among the Americans, Mina Gertrude Lowy was born in London, England, and educated in the art capitals of Europe. Loy's family did not believe in formal education for women, but Lowy, an indulgent father, sent Mina at seventeen to study art in Munich. She moved to Paris in 1903 to continue her study of art, changed her name to Loy, and married Stephen Haweis, and met many of the emerging modernist artists and writers of Paris, including Gertrude and Leo Stein in

whose salon they were introduced to Pablo Picasso. When Loy was twenty-three, they moved to Florence, Italy. The Florence years (1906-1916) brought personal problems as well as Loy's emergence as a modern poet. ... The great stimulant to Loy's poetry was her meeting, before 1913, with the Italian futurists—most significantly her lovers and adversaries F.T. Marinetti and Giovanni Papini. Futurism offered Loy a program of positive thinking; she credited Marinetti with awakening her and showing her how to use her "vitality." She spoke of her conversion to futurism, but she had too much common sense to tolerate the futurists' machismo or to be deluded by their manifesto-ese. Soon the futurists and their ideas were the objects of her satire: as lovers, artists, and promulgators of social programs they were leveled to comic buffoons.

At the beginning of World War I Loy was caught up in the futurists' war fever and worked as a nurse in a surgical hospital; but by 1915 her thoughts turned to the United States and ways of supporting herself there—perhaps by designing clothing, magazine covers, theater sets. Her poems were already appearing in American little magazines. Finally, leaving her children with a nurse in the expectation that she could later return for them, she sailed for New York in October 1916. When she landed, she was quickly singled out by the *New York Evening Sun* as the "modern woman" and joined the shifting configurations of American and expatriate poets and artists grouped around little magazines such as *Camera Work*, *Rogue*, and *Others*. To the lively discussions within these groups about the new possibilities for poetry Mina Loy offered examples of how one might adapt the innovations of the modern European painters and writers to poetry—to convey the dynamism of life, the movement of consciousness, and the collapse of old truths [culminating in her acclaimed masterpiece, *Love Songs*, the first parts of which were published in 1915]. Her poetry of 1914-1919 is distinguished by typographical fragmentations and collage structures learned from Apollinaire, futurism, and cubism; a distinctive abstract/concrete diction that looks back to Jules Laforgue and forward to surrealism; and an unsentimental application of Whitmanesque sexual honesty to female experience.

Loy's early poetry is autobiographical in theme and subject. Her first American publication, in the January 1914 issue of Alfred Stieglitz's *Camera Work*, was appropriately the "Aphorisms on Futurism," fifty-two prescriptions for self-realization. Her satires of the Futurists were often combined with analyses of the repression of women, her main subject in these early poems. "Virgins Plus Curtains Minus Dots" (dots=dowry; in *Rogue*, 15 August 1915), [alongside other poems of this period] offer sad-eyed (Italian) virgins and matrons blinded by romantic dreams and marketed like the dolls in a Paris shop. (Loy's "Feminist Manifesto"—written in 1914 and unpublished until 1982 in *The Last Lunar Baedeker*—asserts that because the economic value of virginity limits women to the roles of wife and mistress it should be surgically destroyed in all women at puberty.) ... In addition to [their] honest presentations of woman's experiences, Loy's poems are important for their technical experiment. Line length fluctuates as pain crests and then recedes; internal spaces suggest pauses of intuition. The movement of consciousness is structured as a Bergsonian alternation of abstraction and image that carries the speaker toward ironic oneness with cosmic becoming.

Loy is considered a free verse poet, but most of her poetry is better defined as the organic poetry that poet **Denise Levertov**, in "Some Notes on Organic Form" (in her *The Poet in the World*, 1965), distinguishes from the formlessness of free verse: it "is a poetry that in thought and in feeling and in perception seeks the forms peculiar to these experiences." Loy's line, though its length fluctuates widely, is typically short; line length, indentations, and internal spacing are based on syntactic and image units and frequently capture the halting progress of discourse. The poem's visual properties

are extremely important to Loy, and occasionally she produces a virtuoso construct of shape and sound. Her rhythms have been criticized for inconsistency, but this problem should not be overstressed. Her rhythm is based upon the line and movement from stanzaic image to stanzaic image, or upon the alternation of abstraction and image—intellect and intuition. The tone is generally colloquial, ironic, and deflationary. In her early poems, especially, closure often takes the form of the speaker's ironic dismissal of her (male) subject or of a mocking shrug at her effort to explain her own (or other women's) predicament. ~ *Poetry Foundation*

“Virgins plus Curtains minus Dots” (1914)

Latin Borghese

Houses hold virgins
The door's on the chain

"Plumb streets with hearts"
"Bore curtains with eyes"

Virgins without dots
Stare beyond probability

See the men pass
Their hats are not ours
We take a walk
They are going somewhere
And they may look everywhere
Men's eyes look into things
Our eyes look out

A great deal of ourselves
We offer to the mirror
Something less to the confessional
The rest to Time
There is so much Time
Everything is full of it
Such a long time

Virgins may whisper
"Transparent nightdresses made all of lace"
Virgins may squeak
"My dear I should faint"
Flutter flutter flutter
. . . . " And then the man — "
Wasting our giggles
For we have no dots

We have been taught
 Love is a god
 White with soft wings
 Nobody shouts
 Virgins for sale
 Yet where are our coins
 For buying a purchaser
 Love is a god
 Marriage expensive
 A secret well kept
 Makes the noise of the world
 Nature's arms spread wide
 Making room for us
 Room for all of us
 Somebody who was never
 a virgin
 Has bolted the door
 Put curtains at our windows
 See the men pass
 They are going somewhere

Fleshes like weeds
 Sprout in the light
 So much flesh in the world
 Wanders at will

Some behind curtains
 Throbs to the night
 Bait to the stars
 Spread it with gold
 And you carry it home
 Against your shirt front
 To a shaded light
 With the door locked
 Against virgins who
 Might scratch.

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Reading and Review Questions

1. What kind of statement does this poem make about the role of (unmarried) women in early 20th C. society? What do the virgins long for most?
2. How does Loy use typographical gaps and pauses to lend meaning to her poem? What are the strongest images in this poem?

1.10 T. S. Eliot (1888 – 1965)



Thomas Stearns Eliot was born in St. Louis, Missouri. Eliot's father, Henry Eliot, was a successful businessman, while his mother, Charlotte Stearns, wrote poetry and was involved in St. Louis's cultural scene. Eliot lived in St. Louis until 1906, when he enrolled at Harvard University where he studied until 1910. Later that year, Eliot left to study at the Sorbonne in Paris for a year, before returning to Harvard to begin work on a Ph.D. In 1914, Eliot left the United States and accepted a scholarship at Oxford University, where he stayed for a year. Although he did not finish his studies at Oxford, Eliot remained in

England, completing his dissertation for Harvard University, since World War I prevented Eliot from returning to the U.S. Instead Eliot stayed in London, later renouncing his American citizenship in favor of British citizenship (1927). Although he was a successful writer, Eliot also worked for a living, first as a teacher, then a banker, before accepting a position at Faber and Faber Publishing House. Eliot would become a tastemaker of the Modernist period, discovering and publishing many Modernist writers and eventually serving as the director of Faber and Faber. Although Eliot never moved back to the United States, he returned quite often to visit as well as to give lectures and readings. Eliot began writing poetry in college, but it was after he moved to England (1914) that he began to write in earnest. Once he started to publish, Eliot's reputation grew until he became one of the central figures of the modernist movement. His essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," offered a highly influential approach for reading and interpreting literature. However, Eliot's poem, *The Waste Land* (1922), was possibly the most famous work of the Modernist era, one that is considered a masterpiece and significantly raised Eliot's profile. Written with editorial guidance from fellow Modernist poet **Ezra Pound**, *The Waste Land* sought to express the disillusionment of the post WWI Modernist era. It is a poem that many other Modernist writers used in their own writing.

The Waste Land (1922)

FOR EZRA POUND
IL MIGLIOR FABBRO

I. The Burial of the Dead

April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.
Winter kept us warm, covering
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding
A little life with dried tubers.
Summer surprised us, coming over the Starnbergersee
With a shower of rain; we stopped in the colonnade,
And went on in sunlight, into the Hofgarten,
And drank coffee, and talked for an hour.
Bin gar keine Russin, stamm' aus Litauen, echt deutsch.

And when we were children, staying at the arch-duke's,
 My cousin's, he took me out on a sled,
 And I was frightened. He said, Marie,
 Marie, hold on tight. And down we went.
 In the mountains, there you feel free.
 I read, much of the night, and go south in the winter.

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
 Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
 You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
 A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
 And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
 And the dry stone no sound of water. Only
 There is shadow under this red rock,
 (Come in under the shadow of this red rock),
 And I will show you something different from either
 Your shadow at morning striding behind you
 Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
 I will show you fear in a handful of dust.

Frisch weht der Wind

Der Heimat zu

Mein Irisch Kind,

Wo weilest du?

“You gave me hyacinths first a year ago;
 “They called me the hyacinth girl.”
 —Yet when we came back, late, from the Hyacinth garden,
 Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not
 Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither
 Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,
 Looking into the heart of light, the silence.
Oed' und leer das Meer.

Madame Sosostris, famous clairvoyante,
 Had a bad cold, nevertheless
 Is known to be the wisest woman in Europe,
 With a wicked pack of cards. Here, said she,
 Is your card, the drowned Phoenician Sailor,
 (Those are pearls that were his eyes. Look!)
 Here is Belladonna, the Lady of the Rocks,
 The lady of situations.
 Here is the man with three staves, and here the Wheel,
 And here is the one-eyed merchant, and this card,
 Which is blank, is something he carries on his back,
 Which I am forbidden to see. I do not find
 The Hanged Man. Fear death by water.
 I see crowds of people, walking round in a ring.

Thank you. If you see dear Mrs. Equitone,
 Tell her I bring the horoscope myself:
 One must be so careful these days.

Unreal City,
 Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
 A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
 I had not thought death had undone so many.
 Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,
 And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.
 Flowed up the hill and down King William Street,
 To where Saint Mary Woolnoth kept the hours
 With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine.
 There I saw one I knew, and stopped him, crying: "Stetson!
 "You who were with me in the ships at Mylae!
 "That corpse you planted last year in your garden,
 "Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?
 "Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed?
 "Oh keep the Dog far hence, that's friend to men,
 "Or with his nails he'll dig it up again!
 "You! hypocrite lecteur!—mon semblable,—mon frère!"

II. A Game of Chess

The Chair she sat in, like a burnished throne,
 Glowed on the marble, where the glass
 Held up by standards wrought with fruited vines
 From which a golden Cupidon peeped out
 (Another hid his eyes behind his wing)
 Doubled the flames of sevenbranched candelabra
 Reflecting light upon the table as
 The glitter of her jewels rose to meet it,
 From satin cases poured in rich profusion;
 In vials of ivory and coloured glass
 Unstoppered, lurked her strange synthetic perfumes,
 Unguent, powdered, or liquid—troubled, confused
 And drowned the sense in odours; stirred by the air
 That freshened from the window, these ascended
 In fattening the prolonged candle-flames,
 Flung their smoke into the laquearia,
 Stirring the pattern on the coffered ceiling.
 Huge sea-wood fed with copper
 Burned green and orange, framed by the coloured stone,
 In which sad light a carvéd dolphin swam.
 Above the antique mantel was displayed

As though a window gave upon the sylvan scene
 The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king
 So rudely forced; yet there the nightingale
 Filled all the desert with inviolable voice
 And still she cried, and still the world pursues,
 “Jug Jug” to dirty ears.
 And other withered stumps of time
 Were told upon the walls; staring forms
 Leaned out, leaning, hushing the room enclosed.
 Footsteps shuffled on the stair.
 Under the firelight, under the brush, her hair
 Spread out in fiery points
 Glowed into words, then would be savagely still.

“My nerves are bad tonight. Yes, bad. Stay with me.
 “Speak to me. Why do you never speak. Speak.
 “What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?
 “I never know what you are thinking. Think.”

I think we are in rats’ alley
 Where the dead men lost their bones.

“What is that noise?”
 The wind under the door.
 “What is that noise now? What is the wind doing?”
 Nothing again nothing.
 “Do
 “You know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you remember
 “Nothing?”

I remember
 Those are pearls that were his eyes.
 “Are you alive, or not? Is there nothing in your head?”

But

O O O O that Shakespeherian Rag—
 It’s so elegant
 So intelligent
 “What shall I do now? What shall I do?”
 “I shall rush out as I am, and walk the street
 “With my hair down, so. What shall we do tomorrow?
 “What shall we ever do?”

 The hot water at ten.
 And if it rains, a closed car at four.
 And we shall play a game of chess,
 Pressing lidless eyes and waiting for a knock upon the door.

When Lil's husband got demobbed, I said—
 I didn't mince my words, I said to her myself,
 HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME
 Now Albert's coming back, make yourself a bit smart.
 He'll want to know what you done with that money he gave you
 To get yourself some teeth. He did, I was there.
 You have them all out, Lil, and get a nice set,
 He said, I swear, I can't bear to look at you.
 And no more can't I, I said, and think of poor Albert,
 He's been in the army four years, he wants a good time,
 And if you don't give it him, there's others will, I said.
 Oh is there, she said. Something o' that, I said.
 Then I'll know who to thank, she said, and give me a straight look.
 HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME
 If you don't like it you can get on with it, I said.
 Others can pick and choose if you can't.
 But if Albert makes off, it won't be for lack of telling.
 You ought to be ashamed, I said, to look so antique.
 (And her only thirty-one.)
 I can't help it, she said, pulling a long face,
 It's them pills I took, to bring it off, she said.
 (She's had five already, and nearly died of young George.)
 The chemist said it would be all right, but I've never been the same.
 You *are* a proper fool, I said.
 Well, if Albert won't leave you alone, there it is, I said,
 What you get married for if you don't want children?
 HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME
 Well, that Sunday Albert was home, they had a hot gammon,
 And they asked me in to dinner, to get the beauty of it hot—
 HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME
 HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME
 Goonight Bill. Goonight Lou. Goonight May. Goonight.
 Ta ta. Goonight. Goonight.
 Good night, ladies, good night, sweet ladies, good night, good night.

III. The Fire Sermon

The river's tent is broken: the last fingers of leaf
 Clutch and sink into the wet bank. The wind
 Crosses the brown land, unheard. The nymphs are departed.
 Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song.
 The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers,
 Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends
 Or other testimony of summer nights. The nymphs are departed.

And their friends, the loitering heirs of city directors;
 Departed, have left no addresses.
 By the waters of Leman I sat down and wept . . .
 Sweet Thames, run softly till I end my song,
 Sweet Thames, run softly, for I speak not loud or long.
 But at my back in a cold blast I hear
 The rattle of the bones, and chuckle spread from ear to ear.

A rat crept softly through the vegetation
 Dragging its slimy belly on the bank
 While I was fishing in the dull canal
 On a winter evening round behind the gashouse
 Musing upon the king my brother's wreck
 And on the king my father's death before him.
 White bodies naked on the low damp ground
 And bones cast in a little low dry garret,
 Rattled by the rat's foot only, year to year.
 But at my back from time to time I hear
 The sound of horns and motors, which shall bring
 Sweeney to Mrs. Porter in the spring.
 O the moon shone bright on Mrs. Porter
 And on her daughter
 They wash their feet in soda water
Et O ces voix d'enfants, chantant dans la coupole!

Twit twit twit
 Jug jug jug jug jug jug
 So rudely forc'd.
 Tereu

Unreal City
 Under the brown fog of a winter noon
 Mr. Eugenides, the Smyrna merchant
 Unshaven, with a pocket full of currants
 C.i.f. London: documents at sight,
 Asked me in demotic French
 To luncheon at the Cannon Street Hotel
 Followed by a weekend at the Metropole.

At the violet hour, when the eyes and back
 Turn upward from the desk, when the human engine waits
 Like a taxi throbbing waiting,
 I Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between two lives,
 Old man with wrinkled female breasts, can see
 At the violet hour, the evening hour that strives
 Homeward, and brings the sailor home from sea,

The typist home at teatime, clears her breakfast, lights
 Her stove, and lays out food in tins.
 Out of the window perilously spread
 Her drying combinations touched by the sun's last rays,
 On the divan are piled (at night her bed)
 Stockings, slippers, camisoles, and stays.
 I Tiresias, old man with wrinkled dugs
 Perceived the scene, and foretold the rest—
 I too awaited the expected guest.
 He, the young man carbuncular, arrives,
 A small house agent's clerk, with one bold stare,
 One of the low on whom assurance sits
 As a silk hat on a Bradford millionaire.
 The time is now propitious, as he guesses,
 The meal is ended, she is bored and tired,
 Endeavours to engage her in caresses
 Which still are unreproved, if undesired.
 Flushed and decided, he assaults at once;
 Exploring hands encounter no defence;
 His vanity requires no response,
 And makes a welcome of indifference.
 (And I Tiresias have foresuffered all
 Enacted on this same divan or bed;
 I who have sat by Thebes below the wall
 And walked among the lowest of the dead.)
 Bestows one final patronising kiss,
 And gropes his way, finding the stairs unlit . . .

She turns and looks a moment in the glass,
 Hardly aware of her departed lover;
 Her brain allows one half-formed thought to pass:
 "Well now that's done: and I'm glad it's over."
 When lovely woman stoops to folly and
 Paces about her room again, alone,
 She smooths her hair with automatic hand,
 And puts a record on the gramophone.

"This music crept by me upon the waters"
 And along the Strand, up Queen Victoria Street.
 O City city, I can sometimes hear
 Beside a public bar in Lower Thames Street,
 The pleasant whining of a mandoline
 And a clatter and a chatter from within
 Where fishmen lounge at noon: where the walls
 Of Magnus Martyr hold
 Inexplicable splendour of Ionian white and gold.

The river sweats
 Oil and tar
 The barges drift
 With the turning tide
 Red sails
 Wide
 To leeward, swing on the heavy spar.
 The barges wash
 Drifting logs
 Down Greenwich reach
 Past the Isle of Dogs.
 Weialala leia
 Wallala leialala

Elizabeth and Leicester
 Beating oars
 The stern was formed
 A gilded shell
 Red and gold
 The brisk swell
 Rippled both shores
 Southwest wind
 Carried down stream
 The peal of bells
 White towers
 Weialala leia
 Wallala leialala

“Trams and dusty trees.
 Highbury bore me. Richmond and Kew
 Undid me. By Richmond I raised my knees
 Supine on the floor of a narrow canoe.”

“My feet are at Moorgate, and my heart
 Under my feet. After the event
 He wept. He promised a ‘new start.’
 I made no comment. What should I resent?”

“On Margate Sands.
 I can connect
 Nothing with nothing.
 The broken fingernails of dirty hands.
 My people humble people who expect
 Nothing.”

la la

To Carthage then I came

Burning burning burning burning
 O Lord Thou pluckest me out
 O Lord Thou pluckest

burning

IV. Death by Water

Phlebas the Phoenician, a fortnight dead,
 Forgot the cry of gulls, and the deep sea swell
 And the profit and loss.

A current under sea

Picked his bones in whispers. As he rose and fell
 He passed the stages of his age and youth
 Entering the whirlpool.

Gentile or Jew

O you who turn the wheel and look to windward,
 Consider Phlebas, who was once handsome and tall as you.

V. What the Thunder Said

After the torchlight red on sweaty faces
 After the frosty silence in the gardens
 After the agony in stony places
 The shouting and the crying
 Prison and palace and reverberation
 Of thunder of spring over distant mountains
 He who was living is now dead
 We who were living are now dying
 With a little patience

Here is no water but only rock
 Rock and no water and the sandy road
 The road winding above among the mountains
 Which are mountains of rock without water
 If there were water we should stop and drink
 Amongst the rock one cannot stop or think
 Sweat is dry and feet are in the sand
 If there were only water amongst the rock
 Dead mountain mouth of carious teeth that cannot spit
 Here one can neither stand nor lie nor sit

Tolling reminiscent bells, that kept the hours
And voices singing out of empty cisterns and exhausted wells.

In this decayed hole among the mountains
In the faint moonlight, the grass is singing
Over the tumbled graves, about the chapel
There is the empty chapel, only the wind's home.
It has no windows, and the door swings,
Dry bones can harm no one.
Only a cock stood on the rooftree
Co co rico co co rico
In a flash of lightning. Then a damp gust
Bringing rain

Ganga was sunken, and the limp leaves
Waited for rain, while the black clouds
Gathered far distant, over Himavant.
The jungle crouched, humped in silence.
Then spoke the thunder
DA

Datta: what have we given?
My friend, blood shaking my heart
The awful daring of a moment's surrender
Which an age of prudence can never retract
By this, and this only, we have existed
Which is not to be found in our obituaries
Or in memories draped by the beneficent spider
Or under seals broken by the lean solicitor
In our empty rooms
DA

Dayadhvam: I have heard the key
Turn in the door once and turn once only
We think of the key, each in his prison
Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison
Only at nightfall, aethereal rumours
Revive for a moment a broken Coriolanus
DA

Damyata: The boat responded
Gaily, to the hand expert with sail and oar
The sea was calm, your heart would have responded
Gaily, when invited, beating obedient
To controlling hands

I sat upon the shore
Fishing, with the arid plain behind me
Shall I at least set my lands in order?

London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down

Poi s'ascose nel foco che gli affina

Quando fiam uti chelidon—O swallow swallow

Le Prince d'Aquitaine à la tour abolie

These fragments I have shored against my ruins

Why then Ile fit you. Hieronimo's mad againe.

Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.

Shantih shantih shantih

Reading and Review Questions

I. The Burial of the Dead

- What elements of the first section set up the problems that the poem as a whole explores: the loss of a unifying mythic consciousness and loss of individual and cultural vitality?
- Is there a single narrative voice behind the various utterances made in the poem? To what extent do the biblical references help you construct a narrator or to what extent do they encompass the poem's meaning?
- What seems to be the value of Madame Sosostris' reading of the Tarot Cards (42-59)? Does she have anything to offer us?
- From lines 60 through 76, who is the "Stetson" character addressed by the narrative voice? What sense of London emerges from this stanza?
- If you are familiar with the grail legends of Arthurian romance, what elements of these stories does the first section introduce?

II. A Game of Chess

- How does this section represent sexuality or sexual reproduction? How do you connect this section with the previous one?
- Why might the reference to Philomel be significant in terms of the poet's task in the waste land as well as to the cultural regeneration the poem calls for?
- How do you interpret the references to Elizabethan and Jacobean drama in this section? Is the poem making a statement about the relationship between the present and literary tradition?

III. The Fire Sermon

- To what extent does this section purge our vision of the scenes in the previous section? Explain.
- If purgation is the theme of this section, what kinds of purgation do you find?
- This section seems to continue the scenes of sexual frustration and apathy from the previous section. But does Tiresias offer a way around these problems? How might Tiresias be considered a purgative or purifying force?
- Why is the mention of Edmund Spenser's River Thames a possible turning point in the poem? Explain.

IV. Death by Water.

- What happens to Phlebas the Phoenician? Does this section advance the "plot"? If so, how?

V. What the Thunder Said.

- In the course of this section, what is discovered, and what does the discovery make possible? For whom? What strategies for survival or at least for understanding do the poem's final three stanzas involve?

Chapter 2 (UNIT 1): Harlem Renaissance

2.1 Introduction

The early years of the twentieth century transformed the United States from a nation of agrarian settlers into a nation of industrial immigrants. With the collapse of the plantation economy and the closing of the western frontier, the United States suddenly became a nation of city-dwellers. The urban economies of the north thrived during this period, and internal migration brought about significant changes in cultural production. While these migratory patterns often reinforced regional identities, they also provided the conditions for the creation of new identities. For African Americans of the early twentieth century, the Harlem Renaissance was the most significant period of cultural formation since the end of the Civil War. The Harlem Renaissance is commonly defined as a period of cultural activity by African American artists that began in Harlem, a New York City neighborhood in northern Manhattan, in the 1920s and ended in the years leading up to World War II. Yet that short span of approximately fifteen years neither accurately describes the period, nor indicates the lasting influence that the Harlem Renaissance continues to have on American literature. In order to locate the roots of the Harlem Renaissance, we need to go back at least as far as 1910 and the founding of *The Crisis*, the journal of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Many members of the Harlem Renaissance, including early luminaries such as **Countee Cullen** and Jessie Redmon Fauset, were closely associated with *The Crisis* and with the high ideals of its editorial page “[to] stand for the right of men, irrespective of color or race, for the highest ideals of American democracy” (Du Bois, November 1910).

This dedication to the idealized principles of American democracy and a celebration of the achievements of African Americans had a direct influence on the early members of the Harlem Renaissance. Many, like Cullen and Fauset, were highly and traditionally educated, and their poetry and fiction descend directly from the English literary traditions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. While other African American writers of the time embraced folklore traditions, Cullen and many others celebrated their association with the highest forms of English literature. From the very beginnings of the Harlem Renaissance, the movement lacked unity. Although some members embraced the high language of Du Bois and those closest to him, others argued for a literature that responded to the writers’ African heritage instead of their European connection. Alain Locke’s *The New Negro* (1925) is often regarded as the manifesto of this pan-Africanism. Writers like Richard Wright, **Langston Hughes**, and **Zora Neale Hurston**, are often considered to be part of this second branch of the Harlem Renaissance. By the 1930s, the Harlem Renaissance no longer signified a unified artistic ideal, and its many voices and members were scattered around the globe by evolving racial tensions in the United States. Beyond Harlem, African American communities were thriving in cities like Chicago, Memphis, Detroit, Baltimore, Washington, and Pittsburgh; furthermore, the wars in Europe were redrawing political boundaries worldwide. Almost as quickly as it began, the Harlem Renaissance faded, but it left behind a legacy of independence in literature, music, and heart that can be traced directly to jazz, the blues, Motown, rock, rap, and hip-hop.

2.2 Langston Hughes (1902 - 1967)



“We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame,” Langston Hughes writes in his 1926 manifesto for the younger generation of Harlem Renaissance artists, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain.” He continues, “If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn’t matter. We know we are beautiful.” Celebrated as “the poet laureate of Harlem,” Langston Hughes was born in Joplin, Missouri, and traveled extensively before settling in the neighborhood he came to call home. When growing up, Hughes lived variously with his grandmother in Lawrence, Kansas, his father in Mexico, and his mother in Washington, D.C. After just one year at Columbia University, Hughes left college to explore the world, working as a cabin boy on ships bound for Africa and as a cook in a Paris kitchen. Throughout these early years, Hughes published poems in the African American magazines *The Crisis* and *Opportunity*; these poems soon earned him recognition as a rising star of the Harlem Renaissance who excelled at the lyrical use of the music, speech, and experiences of urban, working-class African Americans. Hughes published his first book of poetry, *The Weary Blues*, at the age of twenty-four while still a student at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania. Over the course of his long and influential literary career, Hughes worked extensively in all areas of African-American literature, writing novels, short stories, plays, essays, and works of history; translating work by black authors; and editing numerous anthologies of African-American history and culture, such as *The First Book of Jazz* (1955) and *The Best Short Stories by Negro Writers* (1969). Hughes’s poems embody one of the major projects of the Harlem Renaissance: to create distinctively African American art. By the turn of the 20th century, African Americans had awakened to the realization that two hundred years of slavery had simultaneously erased their connections to their African heritage and created, in its wake, new, vital forms of distinctively African American culture. Accordingly, politicians, authors, and artists associated with the Harlem Renaissance reconstructed that lost history and championed art rooted in the black American experience. In “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” Hughes connects African American culture to the birth of civilization in Africa.

“The Negro Speaks of Rivers” (1920)

I’ve known rivers

I’ve known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.

I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.

I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.

I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans, and I’ve seen
its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

I’ve known rivers:

Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

2.3 Countee Cullen (1903 - 1946)



Countee Cullen, one of the most successful writers of the early Harlem Renaissance, was himself a poetic creation. Born sometime around the turn of the twentieth century and raised until his middle teens by a woman who may have been his paternal grandmother, Cullen's academic skills gained him early recognition and entry into New York University, where he graduated with Phi Beta Kappa honors in 1925. Nurtured in the university environment, Cullen published poetry throughout his time at NYU and during his graduate studies at Harvard. While other members of the Harlem

Renaissance, like Alain Locke, author of *The New Negro* (1925), advocated for artistic production that embraced distinctly African themes and styles, Cullen was a traditionalist who believed that African-American writers were entitled to the forms of English literature. In the forward to his 1927 collection *Caroling Dusk*, Cullen made his case succinctly: "Negro poets, dependent as they are on the English language, may have more to gain from the rich background of English and American poetry than from any nebulous atavistic yearnings toward an African influence." ("Excerpts from Countee Cullen's Forward to *Caroling Dusk*." *Modern American Poetry Site*. Ed. Cary Nelson and Bartholomew Brinkman. Department of English, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, n.d. Web. 10 July 2015.) While Cullen's contemporaries like Langston Hughes argued for a more clearly and uniquely defined African-American literature, Cullen focused on traditional forms in his poetry and drew inspiration from the works of John Keats and A. E. Houseman.

Our two selections from Cullen's poetry, "Yet Do I Marvel" and "Heritage," demonstrate both Cullen's command of the historical traditions of English and American poetry and a deep sense of irony regarding his own role as an African-American poet. Both poems were published in 1925 and showcase Cullen's technical skill and his ambivalence. "Yet Do I Marvel," an Italian sonnet in iambic pentameter, uses Cullen's technical skills to remind his audience of the audacity of being a young, well-educated, African-American poet in the early twentieth century. Throughout the poem Cullen creates a sense of irony through the skill with which he interweaves classical references with nods to both John Milton and Percy Bysshe and Mary Shelley only to close with a sense of curiosity that this black poet has been made to sing in classical tones. "Heritage," also from 1925, uses a longer form to ask essential questions about the relationship between African-American poets and African cultural heritage. From the earliest lines of the poem, Cullen expresses distance from the African heritage embraced by other authors of the Harlem Renaissance. Building on the question, "What is Africa to me?" (10), the poem becomes a meditation on the divided self of the young African-American poet. In "Heritage," Cullen reflects on the tensions inherent in the Harlem Renaissance: that the very education that allows a poet like Cullen to achieve widespread notoriety also exposes cultural barriers among the members of the Harlem Renaissance.

"Heritage" (1925)

For Harold Jackman

What is Africa to me:
Copper sun or scarlet sea,
Jungle star or jungle track,

Strong bronzed men, or regal black
 Women from whose loins I sprang
 When the birds of Eden sang?
 One three centuries removed
 From the scenes his fathers loved,
 Spicy grove, cinnamon tree,
 What is Africa to me?
 So I lie, who all day long
 Want no sound except the song
 Sung by wild barbaric birds
 Goaded massive jungle herds,
 Juggernauts of flesh that pass
 Trampling tall defiant grass
 Where young forest lovers lie,
 Plighting troth beneath the sky.
 So I lie, who always hear,
 Though I cram against my ear
 Both my thumbs, and keep them there,
 Great drums throbbing through the air.
 So I lie, whose fount of pride,
 Dear distress, and joy allied,
 Is my somber flesh and skin,
 With the dark blood dammed within
 Like great pulsing tides of wine
 That, I fear, must burst the fine
 Channels of the chafing net
 Where they surge and foam and fret.

Africa? A book one thumbs
 Listlessly, till slumber comes.
 Unremembered are her bats
 Circling through the night, her cats
 Crouching in the river reeds,
 Stalking gentle flesh that feeds
 By the river brink; no more
 Does the bugle-throated roar
 Cry that monarch claws have leapt
 From the scabbards where they slept.
 Silver snakes that once a year
 Doff the lovely coats you wear,
 Seek no covert in your fear
 Lest a mortal eye should see
 What's your nakedness to me?
 Here no leprous flowers rear
 Fierce corollas in the air;
 Here no bodies sleek and wet,

Dripping mingled rain and sweat,
Tread the savage measures of

Jungle boys and girls in love.
What is last year's snow to me,
Last year's anything? The tree
Budding yearly must forget
How its past arose or set--
Bough and blossom, flower, fruit,
Even what shy bird with mute
Wonder at her travail there,
Meekly labored in its hair.
One three centuries removed
From the scenes his fathers loved,
Spicy grove, cinnamon tree,
What is Africa to me?

So I lie, who find no peace
Night or day, no slight release
From the unremitting beat
Made by cruel padded feet
Walking through my body's street.
Up and down they go, and back,
Treading out a jungle track.
So I lie, who never quite
Safely sleep from rain at night--
I can never rest at all
When the rain begins to fall;
Like a soul gone mad with pain
I must match its weird refrain;
Ever must I twist and squirm,
Writhing like a baited worm,
While its primal measures drip
Through my body, crying, "Strip!
Doff this new exuberance.
Come and dance the Lover's Dance!"
In an old remembered way
Rain works on me night and day.

Quaint, outlandish heathen gods
Black men fashion out of rods,
Clay, and brittle bits of stone,
In a likeness like their own,
My conversion came high-priced;
I belong to Jesus Christ,

Preacher of Humility;
Heathen gods are naught to me.

Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,
So I make an idle boast;
Jesus of the twice-turned cheek,
Lamb of God, although I speak
With my mouth thus, in my heart
Do I play a double part.
Ever at Thy glowing altar
Must my heart grow sick and falter,
Wishing He I served were black,
Thinking then it would not lack
Precedent of pain to guide it,
Let who would or might deride it;
Surely then this flesh would know
Yours had borne a kindred woe.
Lord, I fashion dark gods, too,
Daring even to give You
Dark despairing features where,
Crowned with dark rebellious hair,
Patience wavers just so much as
Mortal grief compels, while touches
Quick and hot, of anger, rise
To smitten cheek and weary eyes.
Lord, forgive me if my need
Sometimes shapes a human creed.
All day long and all night through,
One thing only must I do:
Quench my pride and cool my blood,
Lest I perish in the flood,
Lest a hidden ember set
Timber that I thought was wet
Burning like the driest fax,
Melting like the merest wax,
Lest the grave restore its dead.
Not yet has my heart or head
In the least way realized
They and I are civilized.

Reading and Review Questions

1. What is significant about the rivers—the Euphrates, the Congo, the Nile, and the Mississippi—that Hughes names in “The Negro Speaks of Rivers”?
2. Compare and contrast Cullen’s views on poetry to those of Langston Hughes. How does Cullen critique the position of African-American poets? How does their poetry depict the intersections of African, American, and European cultures during the Harlem Renaissance?

2.4 Margaret Walker (1915-1998)



Poet and novelist Margaret Walker was born on July 7, 1915, in Birmingham, Alabama, to the Reverend Sigismund C. Walker and Marion Dozier Walker. The family moved to New Orleans when Walker was a young child. A Methodist minister who had been born near Buff Bay, Jamaica, Walker's father was a scholar who bequeathed to his daughter his love of literature—the classics, the Bible, Benedict de Spinoza, Arthur Schopenhauer, the English classics, and poetry. Similarly, Walker's musician

mother played ragtime and read poetry to her. At age eleven Walker began reading the poetry of **Langston Hughes** and **Countee Cullen**. Elvira Ware Dozier, her maternal grandmother, who lived with her family, told Walker stories, including the story of her own mother, a former slave in Georgia. She met Hughes in 1932, and he encouraged her to continue writing poetry. Her first poem was published in *Crisis* in 1934. Not even ten years later, Walker's first collection of poetry, *For My People* (1942) won the Yale Series of Younger Poets Award. Walker was the first Black woman to ever receive the prestigious award. Her first novel, *Jubilee* (1966), is regarded as “the first truly historical black American novel,” according to *Washington Post* contributor Crispin Y. Campbell. It was also the first work by a black writer to speak out for the liberation of the black woman. The cornerstones of a literature that affirms the African folk roots of black American life, these two books have also been called visionary for looking toward a new cultural unity for black Americans that will be built on that foundation.

The title *For My People* denotes the subject matter of “poems in which the body and spirit of a great group of people are revealed with vigor and undeviating integrity,” wrote Louis Untermeyer in the *Yale Review*. Here, in long ballads, Walker draws sympathetic portraits of characters such as the New Orleans sorceress Molly Means; Kissie Lee, a tough young woman who dies “with her boots on switching blades”; and Poppa Chicken, an urban drug dealer and pimp. Other ballads give a new dignity to John Henry, killed by a ten-pound hammer, and Stagolee, who kills a white officer but eludes a lynch mob. In an essay for *Black Women Writers (1950-1980): A Critical Evaluation*, Eugenia Collier noted, “Using ... the language of the grass-roots people, Walker spins yarns of folk heroes and heroines: those who, faced with the terrible obstacles which haunt Black people's very existence, not only survive but prevail—with style.” Soon after it appeared, the book of ballads, sonnets, and free verse found a surprisingly large number of readers, requiring publishers to authorize three printings to satisfy popular demand.

Walker's collected poetry, *This Is My Century* (1989), and her final volumes of essays, *How I Wrote Jubilee and Other Essays on Life and Literature* (1990) and *On Being Female, Black, and Free* (1997), cemented her place in American letters. Tomeika Ashford described Walker as “one of the foremost transcribers of African American heritage. Indeed, she enjoyed a long and fruitful career—one that spanned almost an entire century. As a result, she became a historian for a race. Through her work, she ‘[sang] a song for [her] people,’ capturing their symbolic quest for liberation. When asked how she viewed her work, she responded, ‘The body of my work . . . springs from my interest in a historical point of view that is central to the development of black people as we approach the twenty-first century.’” ~*Poetry Foundation*

“For My People” (1942)

For my people everywhere singing their slave songs repeatedly: their dirges and their ditties and their blues and jubilees, praying their prayers nightly to an unknown god, bending their knees humbly to an unseen power;

For my people lending their strength to the years, to the gone years and the now years and the maybe years, washing ironing cooking scrubbing sewing mending hoeing plowing digging planting pruning patching dragging along never gaining never reaping never knowing and never understanding;

For my playmates in the clay and dust and sand of Alabama backyards playing baptizing and preaching and doctor and jail and soldier and school and mama and cooking and playhouse and concert and store and hair and Miss Choomby and company;

For the cramped bewildered years we went to school to learn to know the reasons why and the answers to and the people who and the places where and the days when, in memory of the bitter hours when we discovered we were black and poor and small and different and nobody cared and nobody wondered and nobody understood;

For the boys and girls who grew in spite of these things to be man and woman, to laugh and dance and sing and play and drink their wine and religion and success, to marry their playmates and bear children and then die of consumption and anemia and lynching;

For my people thronging 47th Street in Chicago and Lenox Avenue in New York and Rampart Street in New Orleans, lost disinherited dispossessed and happy people filling the cabarets and taverns and other people’s pockets and needing bread and shoes and milk and land and money and something—something all our own;

For my people walking blindly spreading joy, losing time being lazy, sleeping when hungry, shouting when burdened, drinking when hopeless, tied, and shackled and tangled among ourselves by the unseen creatures who tower over us omnisciently and laugh;

For my people blundering and groping and floundering in the dark of churches and schools and clubs and societies, associations and councils and committees and conventions, distressed and disturbed and deceived and devoured by money-hungry glory-craving leeches, preyed on by facile force of state and fad and novelty, by false prophet and holy believer;

For my people standing staring trying to fashion a better way from confusion, from hypocrisy and misunderstanding, trying to fashion a world that will hold all the people, all the faces, all the adams and eves and their countless generations;

Let a new earth rise. Let another world be born. Let a bloody peace be written in the sky. Let a second generation full of courage issue forth; let a people loving freedom come to growth. Let a beauty full of healing and a strength of final clenching be the pulsing in our spirits and our blood. Let the martial songs be written, let the dirges disappear. Let a race of men now rise and take control.

Margaret Walker, “For My People” from *This is My Century: New and Collected Poems*. Copyright © 1989 by Margaret Walker. Reprinted by permission of University of Georgia Press.

Reading and Review Questions

1. What are some of the major images and themes in Margaret Walker’s “For My People”? How do these relate to the depiction of black life in 1930s America?
2. What is the effect of the repetitive use of gerunds throughout the poem? What kind of rhythm is established and how does this link to the poem’s message and content?
3. How does the poem build to the last two stanzas? What do you make of the final images? How do they connect to the *Book of Revelations*? What kind of justice does the poem seek?

2.5 Jean Toomer (1894 - 1967)



Nathan Eugene Toomer, known as Jean, was born in Washington D.C. to a bi-racial father, Nathan Toomer from Georgia, and a bi-racial mother, Nina Pinchback, the daughter of P. B. S. Pinchback, who was the first person of African descent to serve as Governor of Louisiana. Toomer never knew his father, who left the family shortly after Toomer’s birth due to conflicts with his father-in-law, and was raised by the Pinchbacks, a well-respected family who had moved from New Orleans to Washington D.C. in order to escape Jim Crow laws. Since Toomer could “pass” as white and lived in an affluent neighborhood, his racial identity was of little consequence for most of his young life. It was not until he was fourteen, when Toomer moved in with his Uncle Bismark in a working-class African-American neighborhood, that Toomer began to experience racial tension of the period. After graduating high school, Toomer left for the University of Wisconsin to study agriculture, where, according to his own unpublished autobiography, he fully realized the stark racial conflicts between blacks and whites. Toomer dropped out of the University of Wisconsin, briefly studied biology at the University of Chicago, and later attended New York University. During this time, Toomer struggled with his own self-identity since he had always been able to pass as white, yet he began to self-identify as African-American. Toomer held odd jobs in Chicago and New York, while becoming active politically in the Socialist movement and gaining a growing reputation as a writer. However, it was Toomer’s year as the principle of an industrial and agricultural school for African-Americans in Sparta, Georgia that became the inspiration for many of the stories in his groundbreaking work, *Cane* (1923). As Toomer developed a growing reputation, publishing in notable places and working with W. E. B. Du Bois as part of the “talented tenth” in the Harlem Renaissance, *Cane* became a critical success. However, just as *Cane* began to raise his profile, Toomer began to feel hesitant about identifying as African-American and started withdrawing from public life, abandoning fiction and eventually writing philosophical treatises.

“Portrait in Georgia”

Hair--braided chestnut,
 coiled like a lyncher’s rope,
 Eyes--fagots,
 Lips--old scars, or the first red blisters,
 Breath--the last sweet scent of cane,
 And her slim body, white as the ash
 of black flesh after flame

Reading and Review Questions

1. In the short poem “Portrait in Georgia,” how does Toomer’s conciseness affect readers? What type of images is he using in this poem? Why?

2.6 Claude McKay (1889-1948)



Claude McKay was born in Jamaica on September 15, 1889. He was educated by his older brother, who possessed a library of English novels, poetry, and scientific texts. In 1912, McKay published a book of verse called *Songs of Jamaica* (Gardner), recording his impressions of black life in Jamaica in dialect. That same year, he traveled to the United States to attend Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. He remained there only a few months, leaving to study agriculture at Kansas State University. In 1917, he published two sonnets, "The Harlem Dancer" and "Invocation," and later used the form in writing about social and political concerns from his perspective as a black man in the United States. McKay also wrote on a variety of subjects, from his Jamaican homeland to romantic love, with a use of passionate language. During the twenties, McKay developed an interest in Communism and traveled to Russia and then to France, where he met Edna St. Vincent Millay and Lewis Sinclair. In 1934, McKay moved back to the United States and lived in Harlem, New York. Losing faith in Communism, he turned his attention to the teachings of various spiritual and political leaders in Harlem, eventually converting to Catholicism. McKay's viewpoints and poetic achievements in the earlier part of the twentieth century set the tone for the Harlem Renaissance and gained the deep respect of younger black poets of the time, including Langston Hughes. He died on May 22, 1948. ~*American Academy of Poets*

“The Harlem Dancer”

Applauding youths laughed with young prostitutes
 And watched her perfect, half-clothed body sway;
 Her voice was like the sound of blended flutes
 Blown by black players upon a picnic day.
 She sang and danced on gracefully and calm,
 The light gauze hanging loose about her form;
 To me she seemed a proudly-swaying palm
 Grown lovelier for passing through a storm.
 Upon her swarthy neck black shiny curls
 Luxuriant fell; and tossing coins in praise,
 The wine-flushed, bold-eyed boys, and even the girls,
 Devoured her shape with eager, passionate gaze;
 But looking at her falsely-smiling face,
 I knew her self was not in that strange place.

Reading and Review Questions

1. How does McKay characterize the dancer and her dance? What kinds of imagery does he use to convey the scene described here? What do you make of the final two lines?
2. How is form related to content in this poem? How does McKay’s use of the sonnet form contribute to his characterization of “The Harlem Dancer”?

2.7 Angelina Weld Grimké (1880-1958)



Angelina Weld Grimké was born into a family of abolitionist activists that included Angelina Grimké and Sarah Grimké. Her father was the son of a wealthy white aristocrat and a slave. After graduating from the Boston Normal School of Gymnastics in 1902 she became an English teacher in Washington. Grimké also began to write articles and poems about racism and the problems of black people in the United States. A close associate of Mary Church Terrell, Grimké was a strong advocate of women's suffrage. She also worked with Margaret Sanger on her journal *Birth Control Review*. In 1916 the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) commissioned her to write a play about lynching. When *Rachel* was performed the NAACP announced that: "This is the first attempt to use the stage for race propaganda in order to enlighten the American people relative to the lamentable condition of ten millions of colored citizens in this free republic." Other works include *Negro Poets and their Poems* (1923) and *Caroling Dusk* (1927).

“The Black Finger”

I have just seen a beautiful thing
Slim and still,
Against a gold, gold sky,
A straight cypress,
Sensitive
Exquisite,

A black finger
Pointing upwards.
Why, beautiful, still finger are you black?
And why are you pointing upwards?

“Tenebris”

There is a tree, by day,
That, at night, Has a shadow,
A hand huge and black,
With fingers long and black.
All through the dark,
Against the white man's house,

In the little wind,
The black hand plucks and plucks
At the bricks.
The bricks are the color of blood
and very small.
Is it a black hand,
Or is it a shadow?

Reading and Review Questions

1. What is the relationship between the title word “Tenebris” and the poem? Why does Grimké choose the Latin word, rather than titling the poem “In Darkness”?
2. Is there an identifiable form to this poem? What poetic tropes does Grimké use?
3. How does the idea of color (and shadow) function in “Tenebris”? How does this compare with “The Black Finger”? How are her two poems similar or dissimilar to other writers from the Harlem Renaissance?

Chapter 3 (UNIT 2): Postwar Drama

3.1 Tennessee Williams (1911-1983)



Born Thomas Lanier Williams III in Mississippi, Williams later adopted the pen name “Tennessee” after he began his writing career. Williams’s early life was fraught with family dysfunction. Williams’s father was a shoe salesman who struggled with alcoholism and at times exhibited violent tendencies. Williams’s mother, Edwina, covered for her husband’s often embarrassing behavior, attempting to maintain a veneer of Southern gentility. Williams and his two siblings, Dakin and Rose, weathered the family dynamics for a time, until Rose was diagnosed with schizophrenia. After years of treatment proved inadequate, Williams’s mother eventually approved a lobotomy for Rose, and

after the procedure, the young woman was never the same, spending the rest of her life in an institution. Williams, who was very close to Rose, was tormented about his sister, and many of his plays dealt in some way with the trauma Rose endured. Williams attended college for a time as he developed his writing skills, attempting to garner attention for his work. It was not until the 1940s that Williams enjoyed his first success with *The Glass Menagerie*, which opened in Chicago and eventually made its way to New York and enjoyed a long run on Broadway. Williams followed that success in 1947 with *A Streetcar Named Desire*, one of his most enduring plays. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, Williams enjoyed a string of successes and saw a number of his plays adapted for film. By 1959, he had won multiple Pulitzer prizes for his work.

In the 1930s, Williams accepted his sexual orientation as a gay man but maintained a private life. In later years, Williams struggled with alcoholism and prescription drug addiction. After the painful loss of his partner of fourteen years, Frank Merlo, Williams faced serious depression, and over the last twenty years of his life, Williams struggled to reignite his writing career while his health and mental state deteriorated. In February 1983, Williams was found dead in a hotel room in New York after apparently choking on a bottle cap.

Tennessee Williams’s style is often referred to as poetic realism or poetic expressionism. Expressionism is a part of the modernist movement in art and literature, where the expression of emotion or emotional experience takes precedence over the materialistic depiction of physical reality. Williams’s plays typically contain stage directions that call not for a physical setting but for a creation of mood. Physical setting is often altered, augmented, or distorted in order to create a mood or to suggest an emotion. Music, lighting, and screen legends are used symbolically to create this kind of effect. In terms of characterization, Williams’s plays often center on misfits or outcasts—outsiders who are often very sensitive and completely out of tune with contemporary times. Characters may

be at odds with restrictive Southern mores, and they may struggle with sexual repression. In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Blanche DuBois is a complicated character who at times performs the role of Southern Belle, slightly down on her luck but steeped in Southern gentility with fine manners. At other times, the mask slips, and we see Blanche the sexually hungry woman, who gives a predatory stare at the young newspaper boy. At still other times, we see Blanche in all of her raw vulnerability, terrified of being “played out,” of having lost her youth and looks, of being utterly alone.

A Street Car Named Desire (1947)—Book

Reading and Review Questions

1. How is “desire” defined in the play? What is the connection between sex and death in the play?
2. Compare and contrast Blanche and Stella. What is the symbolic significance of their names? Compare and contrast Blanche and Stanley; are they attracted to one another or repelled by one another? Why?
3. Select and analyze any of the following for symbolic significance in the play: the poker game, the streetcars and their names, Blanche’s trunk, images of water, images of light, the flower seller, the newspaper boy, or Belle Reve.
4. Contrast Blanche with her “performance” of Blanche: what are the distinguishing features between the woman and the mask she sometimes creates for others? Does she create different personas for different people in the play? Who is the “real” Blanche?

Chapter 4 (UNIT 2): Postwar Poetry

4.1 Introduction

Since the end of the Second World War to the present day, the people of the United States of America have witnessed the incredible economic and technological growth of their nation into a global cultural and military superpower. These years of growth also have often been times of radical cultural transformation, during which the nation reassessed its traditions. Americans in this period lived through times of war and times of peace, decades of cultural conformity and decades of social revolt. For the first two decades of this period, Americans lived in a racially segregated nation; they now live in a multicultural nation that has twice elected a black president. For much of this period, Americans lived in a world of ideologically warring superpowers poised on the brink of nuclear annihilation; they now live in a world intimately connected by massive computer networks and a complex global economy, yet one still riven by dangerous religious and economic disputes. In popular culture, Americans’ tastes in music have moved from jazz and rock and roll to hip-hop and electronic music. In the visual arts, Americans have seen the explosive canvases of abstract expressionists such as Jackson Pollock become the Campbell’s Soup cans of pop artists such as Andy Warhol and then the video screens of cable television’s MTV and multimedia artists on YouTube. Their art and entertainment have come to them increasingly through technologies, starting with film and radio, then television, and now the Internet. In the literature of this amazingly transformative era, we find a record of how the nation has known, questioned, and even redefined itself. When the United States ended the Second World War by dropping atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the nation was well positioned to assume a role of global leadership. While the cities and factories of both its enemies Germany and Japan and its allies Britain and the Soviet Union were destroyed in the war, the continental U.S. was never

attacked. The American industries that won the war quickly retooled to win the peace, selling cars, radios, and washing machines within an increasingly global economy and ushering in an era of unparalleled American prosperity. The United States government spent tens of billions of dollars in foreign aid to rebuild its former enemies Germany and Japan, ensuring that they would be both economic and military allies in the future. The GI Bill paid for an unprecedented number of young American men to attend colleges and buy homes, creating a huge professional middle class eager to work for the nation's mighty high-tech corporations and live in its swiftly growing new suburbs. The decade and a half following the Second World War is often called the age of conformity, as the nation's large, college-educated middle class embraced the values of the nuclear family and sought happiness, after years of desperate war, in their society's newfound abundance of consumer goods. Yet the peace was short lived, and there was dissent at home.

In the midst of this postwar era of prosperity, Allen Ginsberg composed his great poem "Howl," in which he lambasted the nation's conformist culture for destroying its best and brightest citizens. Authors of the Beat movement of the 1950s—such as Ginsberg—celebrated America's **countercultures** and sought to free literature from traditional formalism and align it more closely with the improvisatory musical solos of jazz, the spontaneous drips and splashes of abstract expressionist action painting, and the everyday utterances of the American street. Poets during this period, such as **Theodore Roethke**, **Anne Sexton**, and **Sylvia Plath**, began sharing intimate, sometimes disturbing details from their lives in a newly confessional mode of poetry that showed how the nuclear family could be a source of stress as well as stability, ultimately showing the nation how the personal situation of the writer could represent the politics of the nation as a whole.

On the world stage, the Soviet Union organized the Eastern European nations it had conquered during the Second World War into a political bloc dedicated to Russian-led state socialism under which the state owns all businesses and administers all social services as opposed to American-led free-market capitalism, under which private individuals own all businesses. The former allies found themselves competing for the hearts and minds of the world over the value of their respective social systems. When the Soviet Union tested its own atomic bomb in 1949, the U.S. and the Soviet Union entered into a conflict called the **Cold War**. The two enemies proceeded to build tens of thousands of nuclear weapons over the following decades to deter each from attacking the other, accumulating enough atomic bombs to destroy human civilization many times over. The U.S. committed itself to a policy of Soviet containment, checking the influence of the so-called red menace abroad through foreign aid and limited military action, and during the **McCarthy Trials**, prosecuting American artists and activists with leftist sympathies at home through such venues as the **House Un-American Activities Committee**. Some of the authors in this chapter had their careers curtailed during this fearful period because of their political beliefs, as when poet William Carlos Williams was stripped of his consultancy to the Library of Congress in 1952 for once having written a poem titled "Russia."

In addition to grappling with the threats of nuclear war and the red menace, Americans at this time were also grappling with the homegrown injustice of racial segregation. Up until 1965, Americans in many states lived under Jim Crow laws that disenfranchised African Americans, keeping black American citizens socially separate from and legally inferior to white citizens. The **civil rights and black power movements** of the 1950s and 60s, led by Dr. Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, increasingly showed the nation that the experience of its prosperous, college-educated white

middle class was not the experience of all Americans. The often-violent struggle to desegregate America was televised across the nation, unifying the country within a new television culture in the very act of displaying its deep ideological divisions. **Toni Morrison's** novel, *Paradise* (Chapter 6, Unit 4) presents a good record of what life was like in segregated America and during the civil rights movement.

In 1963, American President John F. Kennedy was assassinated. In 1974, another American president, Richard M. Nixon, resigned from office in disgrace. The tumultuous decade in between these two events is known as the Sixties. During this decade, America was fighting a seemingly endless war of containment in **Vietnam**. Students on college campuses protested the war and the policies of their own government. Urban populations rioted against racism and economic disparity. Artists and intellectuals radically reassessed America's prosperous postwar era as a culture of one-dimensional organization men trapped in skyscrapers and servile women trapped by what feminist critic Betty Friedan called the feminine mystique. Led by author-activists such as Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem, women in the 1960s and '70s launched a **second wave of feminist political activity**, demanding full social and economic equality with men. Poets such as **Adrienne Rich** embodied the radical politics of their era, composing feminist poems, such as the one by her included in this chapter. Although America returned to a Cold War culture of conformity in the decade preceding the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the changes the Sixties had wrought in the nation's culture were permanent and were often experienced as disorienting.

4.2 Theodore Roethke (1908 - 1963)



Theodore Roethke is one of the most influential poets of the postmodern era. A student of the Modernists, who ultimately outgrew their poetry, Roethke's world is filled with contrasting images of nature and industry that create a sense of hope that distinguishes him from the Modernists, and a sense of insecurity that seems aptly suited to the middle years of the twentieth century. The winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry and two National Book Awards, Roethke is frequently remembered as a teacher, and the work of his own students often obscured the work of the master. The centenary of Roethke's birth in 2008, however, brought renewed attention to his poetic career. Roethke's earliest works of poetry are restrained and spare, as the last lines of "Cuttings" (1948) demonstrate:

One nub of growth
Nudges a sand-crumb loose,
Pokes through a musty sheath
Its pale tendrilous horn. (5-8)

Even in these short lines, however, Roethke's gift for the lyric is clearly visible with the repeated opening sounds of "nub" and "nudges" pushing the reader to the end of the poem. At the same time, the sounds and rhythms of Roethke's poems, with their short lines and broken rhythms, evoke images of constraint and hesitation. "My Papa's Waltz," also from 1948, takes us from the world of hothouses into the hot and enclosed houses of American life. Much like the young plants struggling to grow in "Cuttings," the young boy in "My Papa's Waltz" struggles to grow in his home environment. The poem evokes contrasting images of playful roughhousing and domestic abuse. These contrasting images often lead to heated discussions among readers who are divided

by their interpretations of this poem as one of joyous abandon and one of repeated brutality. Just what is the nature of this waltz that the boy and his father engage in, and how can it be wondrous if the mother's gaze is so disapproving? That Roethke's poetry invites such disparate responses is both a testament to his craftsmanship and a reaction to his deliberate ambiguity. Like the other postwar poets in this section, Roethke's poems reveal the many shadows of modern life.

“My Papa’s Waltz” (1948)

The whiskey on your breath
 Could make a small boy dizzy;
 But I hung on like death:
 Such waltzing was not easy.

We romped until the pans
 Slid from the kitchen shelf;
 My mother's countenance
 Could not unfrown itself.

The hand that held my wrist
 Was battered on one knuckle;
 At every step you missed
 My right ear scraped a buckle.
 You beat time on my head
 With a palm caked hard by dirt,
 Then waltzed me off to bed
 Still clinging to your shirt.

Reading and Review Questions

1. Describe the scene in the kitchen. Is this a happy occasion or is there a darker meaning here?
2. Describe the speaker's attitude toward the mother and the father.
3. What does the poem suggest about a father's responsibilities?

4.3 Sylvia Plath (1932 - 1963)



Sylvia Plath was born in Boston, Massachusetts. Plath's father, a professor of biology at Boston University and an authoritarian figure within the family, died when Plath was eight years old, and Plath struggled for the rest of her life to come to terms with her complicated feelings for him. From a young age, Plath was a high achiever, showing an early talent as a writer and poet. She received a scholarship to Smith College and, after graduating, was awarded a Fulbright Scholarship to Cambridge University.

In spite of a history of depression and one suicide attempt, Plath excelled at academics and worked diligently on her writing, periodically publishing her work. At Cambridge, Plath met the young, British poet Ted Hughes; the two shared an intense and immediate attraction, marrying only a few months later. Plath and Hughes enjoyed their first years together as writing partners, encouraging

each other as poets. The two lived for a time in America, travelled broadly, and eventually returned to England to live. Plath gave birth to two children and engaged in domestic routines while still working on poems which would eventually be included in her posthumous collection, *Ariel* (1965). She continued to struggle with depression, and after discovering Hughes's affair with a mutual friend, she moved to London with her children in an attempt to start over on her own, though her mental health continued to deteriorate and she committed suicide in February 1963.

Plath's most critically acclaimed poems are those that appeared in her posthumous collection, *Ariel*. In these last poems composed before her suicide, Plath appears to have reached a new level of creative complexity in imagery and theme. Her poems exhibit a raw power and anger, as she battles with despair and attempts to find the fortitude to endure her psychic pain. Within the postmodern milieu and contributing to its innovations, Plath does not create a distinct persona through which she filters these intense, private emotions. Poetic form and tradition become less significant with postwar poets, and the poet's voice achieves primacy, especially in the school of poetry termed "Confessional." Poets such as **Anne Sexton** and Plath in the 1950s were willing to probe their psyches in very personal ways, "confessing" their deepest, most private, even disturbing feelings. This kind of psychological probing of the self was new and provocative. From a feminist perspective, Plath in the *Ariel* poems openly explores her feelings of rage against the men in her life and against patriarchal authority in general. She also explores her feelings of ambivalence about being a mother, the cultural pressures she experienced of becoming a wife and mother, the pain she endured as a result of her husband's infidelity, and her battle with depression that culminated in suicide attempts. In "Lady Lazarus," Plath offers both suppressed rage alongside a sense of (self-destructive) empowerment.

"Lady Lazarus" (1965)

I have done it again.
One year in every ten
I manage it——

A sort of walking miracle, my skin
Bright as a Nazi lampshade,
My right foot

A paperweight,
My face a featureless, fine
Jew linen.

Peel off the napkin
O my enemy.
Do I terrify?——

The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth?
The sour breath
Will vanish in a day.

Soon, soon the flesh
The grave cave ate will be
At home on me

And I a smiling woman.
I am only thirty.
And like the cat I have nine times to die.

This is Number Three.
What a trash
To annihilate each decade.

What a million filaments.
The peanut-crunching crowd
Shoves in to see

Them unwrap me hand and foot——
The big strip tease.
Gentlemen, ladies

These are my hands
My knees.
I may be skin and bone,

Nevertheless, I am the same, identical woman.
The first time it happened I was ten.
It was an accident.

The second time I meant
To last it out and not come back at all.
I rocked shut

As a seashell.
They had to call and call
And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls.

Dying
Is an art, like everything else.
I do it exceptionally well.

I do it so it feels like hell.
I do it so it feels real.
I guess you could say I've a call.

It's easy enough to do it in a cell.
It's easy enough to do it and stay put.

It's the theatrical

Comeback in broad day
To the same place, the same face, the same brute
Amused shout:

'A miracle!'
That knocks me out.
There is a charge

For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge
For the hearing of my heart——
It really goes.

And there is a charge, a very large charge
For a word or a touch
Or a bit of blood

Or a piece of my hair or my clothes.
So, so, Herr Doktor.
So, Herr Enemy.

I am your opus,
I am your valuable,
The pure gold baby

That melts to a shriek.
I turn and burn.
Do not think I underestimate your great concern.

Ash, ash——
You poke and stir.
Flesh, bone, there is nothing there——

A cake of soap,
A wedding ring,
A gold filling.

Herr God, Herr Lucifer
Beware
Beware.

Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air.

Reading and Review Questions

1. In “Lady Lazarus,” Plath provides a contemporary revision of the gospel story of Christ’s raising of Lazarus. Why does Plath rewrite the original story through the eyes of a female speaker? How does the poem take the original story and craft something surprising from it? What similarities and differences can you identify between the biblical narrative and Plath’s version?

4.4 Anne Sexton (1928–1974)



Anne Sexton was born in Newton, Massachusetts and raised in Weston. The daughter of a successful businessman, Sexton’s childhood was materially comfortable but not happy. Her relationships with her parents were difficult, perhaps even abusive. Sexton’s closest confidante was her maiden great-aunt. She attended boarding school and after graduation enrolled in Garland Junior College for one year. Sexton later described Garland as a “finishing” school. At age 19, she married Alfred

“Kayo” Sexton II. In 1953, she gave birth to her first child and in 1955, her second. Sexton suffered from post-partum depression, and after the birth of her first daughter she suffered her first breakdown and was admitted to a neuropsychiatric hospital. Other institutionalizations followed. Sexton struggled with depression for the remainder of her life. She committed suicide at age 46.

In treatment, her therapist encouraged her to write and in 1957 Sexton joined writing groups in Boston that eventually led her to friendships and relationships with the poets **Maxine Kumin**, Robert Lowell, George Starbuck, and **Sylvia Plath**. As Sexton told Beatrice Berg, her writing began, in fact, as therapy: “My analyst told me to write between our sessions about what I was feeling and thinking and dreaming.” Her analyst, impressed by her work, encouraged her to keep writing, and eventually, Sexton’s poems about her psychiatric struggles were gathered in her first book, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960), which recounts, as James Dickey wrote, the experiences “of madness and near-madness, of the pathetic, well-meaning, necessarily tentative and perilous attempts at cure, and of the patient’s slow coming back into the human associations and responsibilities which the old, previous self still demands.” Sexton’s work is usually grouped with other Confessional poets such as **Plath** and was enormously popular during her lifetime. She was the recipient of numerous honors and awards, including a Guggenheim Fellowship. Despite her many achievements, critical discussions of her work tended to focus on the apparently autobiographical elements of her verse. Yet Sexton’s canniness about the power of fiction, the uses of fact and imagination, and the poem—or poet—as essentially performance mean that no simple equations between poet and poem, life and art, can be drawn. One of Sexton’s earliest champions, Erica Jong, assessed Sexton’s poetic significance and contended that her artistry was seriously overlooked: “She is an important poet not only because of her courage in dealing with previously forbidden subjects, but because she can make the language sing.” ~ *Poetry Foundation*

“Sylvia’s Death” (1963)

for Sylvia Plath

O Sylvia, Sylvia,
with a dead box of stones and spoons,

with two children, two meteors
wandering loose in a tiny playroom,

with your mouth into the sheet,
into the roofbeam, into the dumb prayer,

(Sylvia, Sylvia
where did you go
after you wrote me
from Devonshire
about rasing potatoes
and keeping bees?)
what did you stand by,
just how did you lie down into?

Thief --
how did you crawl into,

crawl down alone
into the death I wanted so badly and for so long,

the death we said we both outgrew,
the one we wore on our skinny breasts,

the one we talked of so often each time
we downed three extra dry martinis in Boston,

the death that talked of analysts and cures,
the death that talked like brides with plots,

the death we drank to,
the motives and the quiet deed?

(In Boston
the dying
ride in cabs,
yes death again,
that ride home
with our boy.)

O Sylvia, I remember the sleepy drummer
who beat on our eyes with an old story,

how we wanted to let him come
like a sadist or a New York fairy

to do his job,
a necessity, a window in a wall or a crib,

and since that time he waited
under our heart, our cupboard,

and I see now that we store him up
year after year, old suicides

and I know at the news of your death
a terrible taste for it, like salt,
(And me,
me too.

And now, Sylvia,
you again
with death again,
that ride home
with our boy.)

And I say only
with my arms stretched out into that stone place,

what is your death
but an old belonging,

a mole that fell out
of one of your poems?

(O friend,
while the moon's bad,
and the king's gone,
and the queen's at her wit's end
the bar fly ought to sing!)

O tiny mother,
you too!
O funny duchess!
O blonde thing!

Reading and Review Questions

1. In Anne Sexton's "Her Kind," what feminine constructions does the poem address? Why and how does the speaker identify with the witch archetype? Why is a "woman like that ... not ashamed to die" (line 20)?
2. In what ways is the speaker in "Sylvia's Death" compare herself to her dead friend? Why is she envious of the other woman's suicide? What is the speaker's tone? Angry, abandoned, elegiac, scathing? Is this poem about "Sylvia" or the speaker?

4.5 Denise Levertov (1923-1997)



During the course of a prolific career, Denise Levertov created a highly regarded body of poetry that reflects her beliefs as an artist and a humanist. Her work embraces a wide variety of genres and themes, including nature lyrics, love poems, protest poetry, and poetry inspired by her faith in God. Although born and raised in England, Levertov came to the United States when she was twenty-five years old, and all but her first few poetry collections have been described as thoroughly American. Levertov had confidence in her poetic abilities from the beginning, and several well-respected literary figures believed in her talents as well. Her first book of poems, *The Double Image*, was published just after the war in 1946. Although a few poems in this collection focus on the war, there is no direct evidence of the immediate events of the time. Levertov came to the United States in 1948, after marrying American writer Mitchell Goodman, and began developing the style that was to make her an internationally respected American poet. Levertov's American poetic voice was, in one sense, indebted to the simple, concrete language and imagery, and also the immediacy, characteristic of **Williams Carlos Williams's** art. In another sense, Levertov's verse exhibited the influence of the Black Mountain poets, such as Robert Duncan, Charles Olson, and **Robert Creeley**, whom Levertov met through her husband. Unlike her early formalized verse, Levertov now gave homage to the projectivist verse of the Black Mountain era, whereby the poet "projects" through content rather than through strict meter or form. Although Levertov was assuredly influenced by several renowned American writers of the time, she developed her own unique voice.

During the turbulent 1960s, Levertov delved into socio-political poetry and continued writing in this sphere; in *Modern American Women Poets* Jean Gould called her "a poet of definite political and social consciousness." However, Levertov refused to be labeled, and Rexroth once described her "in fact classically independent." With the onset of the U.S. involvement in Vietnam during the 1960s, Levertov's social consciousness began to more completely inform both her poetry and her private life. With Muriel Rukeyser and several other poets, Levertov founded the Writers and Artists Protest against the War in Vietnam. She took part in several anti-war demonstrations in Berkeley, California, and elsewhere, and was briefly jailed on numerous occasions for civil disobedience. In the ensuing decades she spoke out against nuclear weaponry, American aid to El Salvador, and the Persian Gulf War. Her goal was to motivate others into an awareness of these various issues, particularly the Vietnam War and ecological concerns. ~*Poetry Foundation*

“Life at War” (1966)

The disasters numb within us
 caught in the chest, rolling
 in the brain like pebbles. The feeling
 resembles lumps of raw dough

weighing down a child’s stomach on baking day.
 Or Rilke said it, ‘My heart. . .
 Could I say of it, it overflows
 with bitterness . . . but no, as though

its contents were simply balled into
 formless lumps, thus
 do I carry it about.’
 The same war

continues.
 We have breathed the grits of it in, all our lives,
 our lungs are pocked with it,

the mucous membrane of our dreams
 coated with it, the imagination
 filmed over with the gray filth of it:
 the knowledge that humankind,

delicate Man, whose flesh
 responds to a caress, whose eyes
 are flowers that perceive the stars,

whose music excels the music of birds,
 whose laughter matches the laughter of dogs,
 whose understanding manifests designs
 fairer than the spider’s most intricate web,

still turns without surprise, with mere regret
 to the scheduled breaking open of breasts whose milk
 runs out over the entrails of still-alive babies,
 transformation of witnessing eyes to pulp-fragments,
 implosion of skinned penises into carcass-gulleys.

We are the humans, men who can make;
 whose language imagines mercy,
 lovingkindness we have believed one another
 mirrored forms of a God we felt as good—

who do these acts, who convince ourselves
 it is necessary; these acts are done
 to our own flesh; burned human flesh
 is smelling in Vietnam as I write.

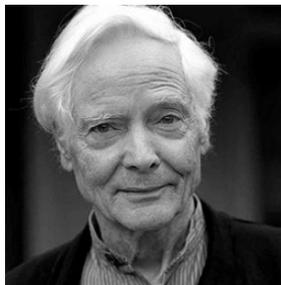
Yes, this is the knowledge that jostles for space
 in our bodies along with all we
 go on knowing of joy, of love;

our nerve filaments twitch with its presence
 day and night,
 nothing we say has not the husky phlegm of it in the saying,
 nothing we do has the quickness, the sureness,
 the deep intelligence living at peace would have.

Reading and Review Questions

1. How would you describe the speaker's tone in "Life at War"? Which images from the poem best convey the speaker's opinion about war?
2. How does this poem speak to both civilian and combatant experiences of war? How is violence represented in the poem?
3. Is this poem only about Vietnam or is it addressed more broadly to universal experiences of war? Does this poem work as anti-war protest?

4.6 W.S. Merwin (1927-2019)



William Stanley Merwin was born in New York City on September 30, 1927. He was raised in Union City, New Jersey and Scranton, Pennsylvania, as the son of a Presbyterian minister, and began writing hymns as a child. Merwin attended Princeton University on a scholarship, where he was a classmate of Galway Kinnell, and studied poetry with the critic R. P. Blackmur, and his teaching assistant, John Berryman. After graduating in 1948, Merwin spent an additional year at Princeton studying Romance languages, a pursuit that would later lead to his prolific work as a translator of Latin, Spanish, and French poetry. He soon married his first wife, Dorothy Jeanne Ferry, and began writing verse plays and working as a tutor to the children of wealthy families. He traveled throughout Europe, and in 1950 took a position in Majorca, Spain, as an instructor to the son of Robert Graves. While there, he met Dido Milroy, whom he eventually married after his first marriage ended. Merwin's first collection, *A Mask for Janus* (Yale University Press, 1952), was praised for its technical virtuosity, and bore the influence both of Graves and the medieval poetry Merwin was translating, in its focus on classical imagery and myth. After leaving Majorca, Merwin remained in Europe, living in London and the South of France for several years. In 1956, he received a fellowship from the Poets' Theater in Cambridge, MA, and moved back to the United States. While in Boston, he entered the circle of writers that surrounded Robert Lowell and decided to concentrate on poetry. In 1967, Merwin published the critically acclaimed volume, *The Lice* (Atheneum, 1967), followed by *The Carrier of Ladders* (Atheneum, 1970), for which he received the Pulitzer Prize. In a letter to the *New York Review of Books*, he declared his intention to donate the \$1000 prize to antiwar causes as protest against the Vietnam War.

In 1976, Merwin moved to Hawaii to study with the Zen Buddhist master Robert Aitken. The Buddhism and environmentalism that Merwin devoted himself to in Hawaii influenced his later work. A former Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets, Merwin also served as Poetry Consultant to the Library of Congress and as Poet Laureate of the United States from 2010 to 2011. He died on March 15, 2019. ~*American Academy of Poets*

For a Coming Extinction

Gray whale

Now that we are sending you to The End

That great god

Tell him

That we who follow you invented forgiveness

And forgive nothing

I write as though you could understand

And I could say it

One must always pretend something

Among the dying

When you have left the seas nodding on their stalks

Empty of you

Tell him that we were made

On another day

The bewilderment will diminish like an echo

Winding along your inner mountains

Unheard by us

And find its way out

Leaving behind it the future

Dead

And ours

When you will not see again

The whale calves trying the light

Consider what you will find in the black garden

And its court

The sea cows the Great Auks the gorillas

The irreplaceable hosts ranged countless

And fore-ordaining as stars

Our sacrifices

Join your word to theirs

Tell him

That it is we who are important

4.7 Maxine Kumin (1925-2014)



An enduring presence in American poetry, Maxine Kumin’s career spanned over half a century. Maxine Kumin (née Winokur) was born to a Reform Jewish family in Germantown, Pennsylvania. She attended Catholic and public schools before earning a BA and MA from Radcliffe College and married Victor Kumin in 1946 while still a student, and she would have two daughters and a son. On her early writing days, Kumin remarked, “I began writing poetry in the Dark Ages of the '50s with very little sense of who I was—a wife, a daughter, a mother, a college instructor, a swimmer, a horse

lover, a hermit.” Despite traveling away from home to lecture at schools and universities around the United States, Kumin retained close ties with her farmhouse in rural New Hampshire, where she maintained a garden and stable of horses; in an interview with Joan Norris published in *Crazy Horse*, the poet disclosed, “Practically all of [my poems] have come out of this geography and this state of mind.” In a 2012 interview with recording by Mary Kuechenmeister, Kumin remarked, “The garden has to be attended every day, just as the horses have to be tended to, not just every day, but morning, noon and night. The writing, I think, exerts the same kind of discipline. A day without sitting down at my desk seriously is a day full of guilt. I think of myself as a Jewish Calvinist, you know, salvation through grace, grace through good works and working is good, just that simple. I wouldn’t trade this life for any other.”

Because her verse is deeply connected to her native New England, Kumin is often referred to as a regional pastoral poet. “I have been twitted with the epithet ‘Roberta Frost,’ which is not a bad thing to be,” Kumin told interviewer Karla Hammond in the *Western Humanities Review*. In other efforts to classify her work, critics have also described her as a transcendentalist, like Henry David Thoreau, or a confessional poet, like Kumin’s friend and coauthor, the late **Anne Sexton**. She has also been likened to Elizabeth Bishop because of her commitment to meticulous observation. In many ways, though, Kumin is unlike other poets. Her insistence on order is notable. Her poems are also mature for another reason: Kumin did not begin to write and publish until mid-life, when she found encouragement in workshops at the Boston Center for Adult Education. Her early poems display her mastery of technique and deal with themes that she has continued to explore throughout her career: identity, the ephemeral nature of life, loss, and man’s relationship to nature. Many of these early works were collected in Kumin’s first book of poems, *Halfway* (1961), published when she was 36. While attending the Boston workshops, Kumin met and befriended the poet **Anne Sexton**. Both homemakers with children when they began their literary careers, they wrote four children’s books together and in general contributed to each other’s development. The two poets communicated on a nearly daily basis, conducting private workshops by letter and phone. Consequently, critics tried to trace a strong mutual influence, but both poets denied one. Nonetheless, there were some significant exchanges, and the two poets suggested titles for each other’s work on at least two occasions.

When Kumin was 73 she suffered an accident while preparing a horse for competition and broke her neck, receiving serious internal injuries. She was able to make a successful recovery, however, and her book *Inside the Halo and Beyond: The Anatomy of a Recovery* (1999) describes her convalescence. Kumin herself has said, in an interview with the *Christian Science Monitor*, “writing is my salvation. If I didn’t write, what would I do?” ~*Poetry Foundation*

“Woodchucks” (1972)

Gassing the woodchucks didn't turn out right.
 The knockout bomb from the Feed and Grain Exchange
 was featured as merciful, quick at the bone
 and the case we had against them was airtight,
 both exits shoehorned shut with puddingstone,
 but they had a sub-sub-basement out of range.

Next morning they turned up again, no worse
 for the cyanide than we for our cigarettes
 and state-store Scotch, all of us up to scratch.
 They brought down the marigolds as a matter of course
 and then took over the vegetable patch
 nipping the broccoli shoots, beheading the carrots.

The food from our mouths, I said, righteously thrilling
 to the feel of the .22, the bullets' neat noses.
 I, a lapsed pacifist fallen from grace
 puffed with Darwinian pieties for killing,
 now drew a bead on the little woodchuck's face.
 He died down in the everbearing roses.

Ten minutes later I dropped the mother. She
 flipfopped in the air and fell, her needle teeth
 still hooked in a leaf of early Swiss chard.
 Another baby next. O one-two-three
 the murderer inside me rose up hard,
 the hawkeye killer came on stage forthwith.

There's one chuck left. Old wily fellow, he keeps
 me cocked and ready day after day after day.
 All night I hunt his humped-up form. I dream
 I sight along the barrel in my sleep.
 If only they'd all consented to die unseen
 gassed underground the quiet Nazi way.

From *Our Ground Time Here Will Be Brief*, by Maxine Kumin, published by Penguin Books. Copyright © 1972, 1982 by Maxine Kumin.

Reading and Review Questions

1. What is the gender of this poem's speaker? Does it matter? Locate descriptive phrases or lines that could apply to a man just as well as to a woman.
2. What is this poem really about? Killing woodchucks or something more symbolic?
3. In what ways is the speaker haunted or conflicted about his or her treatment of the woodchucks? How might this poem be read in the context of war poetry? Why does it deal with the topic of violence in a seemingly indirect way?

4.8 Audre Lorde (1934-1992)



A self-described “black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet,” Audre Lorde dedicated both her life and her creative talent to confronting and addressing injustices of racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia. Lorde was born in New York City to West Indian immigrant parents. She attended Catholic school and published her first poem in *Seventeen* magazine while still in high school. Lorde earned her BA from Hunter College and MLS from Columbia University. She was a

librarian in the New York public schools throughout the 1960s. She had two children with her husband, Edward Rollins, a white, gay man, before they divorced in 1970. In 1972, Lorde met her long-time partner, Frances Clayton. She also began teaching as poet-in-residence at Tougaloo College. Her experiences with teaching and pedagogy—as well as her place as a Black, queer woman in white academia—went on to inform her life and work. Indeed, Lorde’s contributions to feminist theory, critical race studies, and queer theory intertwine her personal experiences with broader political aims. “I have a duty,” Lorde once stated, “to speak the truth as I see it and to share not just my triumphs, not just the things that felt good, but the pain, the intense, often unmitigating pain.” Lorde was central to many liberation movements and activist circles, including second-wave feminism, civil rights and Black cultural movements, and struggles for GLBQT equality. In particular, Lorde’s poetry is known for the power of its call for social and racial justice, as well as its depictions of queer experience and sexuality. ~ *Poetry Foundation*

“Who Said It Was Simple” (1973)

There are so many roots to the tree of anger
that sometimes the branches shatter
before they bear.

Sitting in Nedicks
the women rally before they march
discussing the problematic girls
they hire to make them free.
An almost white counterman passes
a waiting brother to serve them first
and the ladies neither notice nor reject
the slighter pleasures of their slavery.
But I who am bound by my mirror
as well as my bed
see causes in colour
as well as sex

and sit here wondering
which me will survive
all these liberations.

From a Land Where Other People Live. Copyright © 1973

“A Litany for Survival” (1978)

For those of us who live at the shoreline
standing upon the constant edges of decision
crucial and alone
for those of us who cannot indulge
the passing dreams of choice
who love in doorways coming and going
in the hours between dawns
looking inward and outward
at once before and after
seeking a now that can breed
futures
like bread in our children’s mouths
so their dreams will not reflect
the death of ours;

For those of us
who were imprinted with fear
like a faint line in the center of our foreheads
learning to be afraid with our mother’s milk
for by this weapon
this illusion of some safety to be found
the heavy-footed hoped to silence us
For all of us
this instant and this triumph
We were never meant to survive.

And when the sun rises we are afraid
it might not remain
when the sun sets we are afraid
it might not rise in the morning
when our stomachs are full we are afraid
of indigestion
when our stomachs are empty we are afraid
we may never eat again
when we are loved we are afraid
love will vanish
when we are alone we are afraid
love will never return
and when we speak we are afraid
our words will not be heard
nor welcomed
but when we are silent
we are still afraid

So it is better to speak
remembering
we were never meant to survive.

Copyright © 1978 by Audre Lorde, from *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde* by Audre Lorde.

Reading and Review Questions

1. In “Who Said It Was Simple,” what do you think the first stanza means? (Lines 1-3). Relating to the poem, what isn’t simple? Why is it not simple?
2. The term “intersectional” is often used to describe layers of oppression. In either poem, how do racism, sexism, hetero-normativism, and other forms of oppressive systems work interconnectedly in the speaker’s sense of identity?
3. In “Litany for Survival,” what is the meaning of survival? In other words, what does it mean to survive? Who are the “we” that the poem addresses? Why is it important that they “speak”? To what extent might speaking or language be a tool of liberation?

4.9 Judy Grahn (1940-)



Poet, activist, and scholar Judy Grahn was born in Chicago and grew up in New Mexico. She joined the Air Force but was discharged at 21 for being openly gay. A central member of the West Coast feminist poetry movement of the 1970s, Grahn received a PhD from the California Institute of Integral Studies. In a 2009 essay for the *Boston Review* on the poetry of the women’s movement, poet Honor Moore spoke of hearing Grahn read her epic poem “A Woman is Talking to Death” in the early 1970s: “With this poem, the whole political enterprise of feminism was subsumed by poetic means into an understanding of the complexity of the stark power relations that involve gender, race, and sexuality.” In 1969, Grahn co-founded the Women’s Press Collective of the San Francisco Bay area and was a founding member of the West Coast New Lesbian Feminist Movement. Her free verse poetry engages feminist and queer themes with plain language and an etymological curiosity that often eschews metaphor in favor of incantation. Grahn’s collection of selected and new poems, *love belongs to those who do the feeling* (2008) won the 2009 Lambda Literary Award for Lesbian Poetry. Her most recent collection of poetry, *Hanging On Our Own Bones* (2017), collects seven long narratives Grahn has called “ninepart poems” into incantatory lamentations that draw on goddess mythology and social critique.

“I Have Come to Claim Marilyn Monroe’s Body”

I have come to claim Marilyn Monroe’s body
for the sake of my own
dig it up
hand it over
cram it in this paper sack
hubba hubba hubba

Look at those luscious long brown bones
 that wide and crusty pelvis
 ha ha
 oh she wanted so much to be serious
 but she'll never stop smiling now
 has she lost her mind
 Marilyn be serious
 they're taking your picture

And they're taking the pictures of
 eight young women in New York City
 who murdered themselves for being pretty
 by the same method as you
 the very next day after you
 I have claimed their bodies too
 they smile up out of my paper sack
 like brainless Cinderellas

the reporters are furious
 they are asking me questions
 what right does a woman have to Marilyn Monroe's body?
 and what am I doing for lunch?
 ha ha they think I mean to eat you
 their teeth are lurid and they want to pose me
 leaning on the shovel, nude
 don't squint
 but when one of the reporters comes too close
 I beat him
 bust his camera with your long smooth thigh
 and with your lovely knuckle bone
 I break his eye

Long ago you wanted to write poems
 Be serious, Marilyn
 I am going to take you in this paper sack
 around the world, and
 write on it: —the poems of Marilyn Monroe—
 Dedicated to all princes,
 the male poets who were so sorry to see you go,
 before they had a crack at you.

They wept for you
 and also they wanted to stuff you while
 you still had a little meat left in useful places
 but they were too slow.

Now I shall take them my paper sack
 and we shall act out a poem together:
 “How would you like to see Marilyn Monroe,
 in action, smiling, and without her clothes?”
 We shall wait long enough to see them make familiar faces
 and then I shall beat them with your skull.
 hubba. hubba. hubba. hubba. hubba.

Marilyn be serious
 today I have come to claim your body for my own

From *Edward the Dyke and Other Poems*, Oakland Women’s Press Collective; 1ST edition (1971)

4.10 Adrienne Rich (1929 - 2012)



Adrienne Rich is one of the most important poets and feminists of the middle to late twentieth century. Taken together, the twenty-five collections of poetry and numerous essays she published in her lifetime are a powerful literary expression of this period’s radical politics. Born in Baltimore, Maryland, Rich was encouraged to write poetry at an early age by her father, a pathologist at Johns Hopkins Medical School with a passion for English verse. She distinguished herself as a poet early in life, publishing her first book of poems, *A Change of World*, in 1951 while still a senior at Radcliffe College. In 1952, Rich won her first of two coveted Guggenheim Fellowships, which funded a year-long trip to England and Italy. In 1953, she married an economics professor from Harvard, giving birth to three children before the end of the decade. In this formative decade, Rich faced a dilemma still familiar to women today: how to maintain her career while shouldering full responsibility for her children and home. Rich’s restrained poetry became radicalized, as she realized that her personal situation was also political, an expression of social forces and institutions that the poet herself could change. From the 1960s until she published her final collection in 2010, Rich used poetry to criticize war, sexism, and environmental destruction and to imagine a world free of gender divisions and male domination. Beginning in the 1970s, Rich became an outspoken advocate for lesbian rights in her poetry as well. In the 1960s Rich came to realize that she had been living as a “suppressed lesbian” her entire life. She separated from her husband in 1970 and entered into a relationship with the novelist Michelle Cliff in 1974, with whom she remained partners until her death in 2012.

Rich’s National Book Award winning collection of 1973, *Diving into the Wreck*, exemplifies her poetry of political conviction. Published during the second wave feminist movement, the poems in this volume describe women as a vast global sisterhood that has been written out of history. Rich optimistically imagines that this oppressive situation can change as society itself changes, in part through the force of the poet’s voice. The history of Western civilization, as Rich writes in the closing lines of the titular poem presented here, “Diving into the Wreck,” is “a book of myths / in which / our names do not appear.” The wreck in this poem is the wreck of western civilization itself, containing the ruins of both patriarchy and poetry. The poem’s narrator is a person unimaginable in traditional Western society: someone who identifies with both genders at once

and who transforms the decline of one civilization into the art of its successor. This hybrid narrator takes the reader on a dramatic journey into this dangerous wreck so that the reader, too, can imagine the end of a divisive civilization in which men dominate women.

“Diving into the Wreck” (1973)

First having read the book of myths,
and loaded the camera,
and checked the edge of the knife-blade,
I put on
the body-armor of black rubber
the absurd flippers
the grave and awkward mask. I am having to do this
not like Cousteau with his
assiduous team
aboard the sun-flooded schooner
but here alone.

There is a ladder.
The ladder is always there
hanging innocently
close to the side of the schooner.
We know what it is for,
we who have used it.
Otherwise
it is a piece of maritime floss
some sundry equipment.
I go down.
Rung after rung and still
the oxygen immerses me
the blue light
the clear atoms
of our human air.
I go down.
My flippers cripple me,
I crawl like an insect down the ladder
and there is no one
to tell me when the ocean
will begin.

First the air is blue and then
it is bluer and then green and then
black I am blacking out and yet
my mask is powerful
it pumps my blood with power
the sea is another story

the sea is not a question of power
I have to learn alone
to turn my body without force
in the deep element.
And now: it is easy to forget
what I came for
among so many who have always
lived here
swaying their crenellated fans
between the reefs
and besides
you breathe differently down here.

I came to explore the wreck.
The words are purposes.
The words are maps.
I came to see the damage that was done
and the treasures that prevail.
I stroke the beam of my lamp
slowly along the flank
of something more permanent
than fish or weed

the thing I came for:
the wreck and not the story of the wreck
the thing itself and not the myth
the drowned face always staring
toward the sun
the evidence of damage
worn by salt and sway into this threadbare beauty
the ribs of the disaster
curving their assertion
among the tentative haunters.

This is the place.
And I am here, the mermaid whose dark hair
streams black, the merman in his armored body.
We circle silently
about the wreck
we dive into the hold.
I am she: I am he

whose drowned face sleeps with open eyes
whose breasts still bear the stress
whose silver, copper, vermeil cargo lies
obscurely inside barrels

half-wedged and left to rot
 we are the half-destroyed instruments
 that once held to a course
 the water-eaten log
 the fouled compass

We are, I am, you are
 by cowardice or courage
 the one who find our way
 back to this scene
 carrying a knife, a camera
 a book of myths
 in which
 our names do not appear.

Diving into the Wreck: Poems 1971-1972 by Adrienne Rich. Copyright © 1973

Reading and Review Questions

1. The book of myths is a metaphor for all the writings of Western civilization. Why does the poem's narrator "first [have] to read the books of myths" before making this metaphoric dive into the wreck of Western civilization?
2. In the final stanza, Rich contradictorily writes that the narrator finds her way "by cowardice or courage...back to this scene." If cowardice, then what fear is she succumbing to? If courage, then what fear is she facing?
3. Rich's narrator worries in stanza five that "it is easy to forget / what I came for." What does the narrator come to the wreck for? Why is it so easy to forget this goal?

4.11 Louise Glück



Louise Glück was born in New York City in 1943 and grew up on Long Island. She attended Sarah Lawrence College and Columbia University. Considered by many to be one of America's most talented contemporary poets, Glück is noted for her poetry's technical precision, sensitivity, and insight into loneliness, family relationships, divorce, and death, as well as what poet Rosanna Warren has called its "classicizing gestures" or frequent reworking of Greek and Roman myths such as Persephone and Demeter. According to Warren, Glück's "power [is] to distance the lyric 'I' as subject and object of attention" and to "impose a discipline of detachment upon urgently subjective material." Glück's early books feature personae grappling with the aftermaths of failed love affairs, disastrous family encounters, and existential despair, and her later work continues to explore the agony of the self. In the *New York Times*, critic William Logan described her work as "the logical outcome of a certain strain of confessional verse—starved of adjectives, thinned to a nervous set of verbs, intense almost past bearing, her poems have been dark, damaged and difficult to avert your gaze from."

Glück's first book of poetry, *Firstborn* (1968), was recognized for its technical control as well as its collection of disaffected, isolated narratives. Glück's poems take readers on an inner journey by exploring their deepest, most intimate feelings. Her ability to create poetry that many people can understand, relate to, and experience intensely and completely stems from her deceptively straightforward language and poetic voice. Because Glück writes so effectively about disappointment, rejection, loss, and isolation, reviewers frequently refer to her poetry as "bleak" or "dark." Readers and reviewers have also marveled at Glück's gift for creating poetry with a dreamlike quality that at the same time deals with the realities of passionate and emotional subjects. Glück's Pulitzer prize-winning collection, *The Wild Iris* (1992), clearly demonstrates her visionary poetics. The book, written in three segments, is set in a garden and imagines three voices: flowers speaking to the gardener-poet, the gardener-poet, and an omniscient god figure. *Meadowlands* (1996), Glück's first new work after *The Wild Iris*, takes its impetus from Greek and Roman mythology. The book uses the voices of Odysseus and Penelope to create "a kind of high-low rhetorical experiment in marriage studies," according to Deborah Garrison in the *New York Times Book Review*. Garrison added that, through the "suburban banter" between the ancient wanderer and his wife, *Meadowlands* "captures the way that a marriage itself has a tone, a set of shared vocal grooves inseparable from the particular personalities involved and the partial truces they've made along the way."

In 2003 Glück was named the 12th U.S. Poet Laureate. In addition to the Pulitzer and Bollingen Prizes, she has received many awards and honors for her work, including the Lannan Literary Award for Poetry, a Sara Teasdale Memorial Prize, the MIT Anniversary Medal, and fellowships from the Guggenheim and Rockefeller Foundations, and from the National Endowment for the Arts. In 2008, she was awarded the Wallace Stevens Award, and in 2015 she received the Gold Medal for Poetry from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Glück is currently writer-in-residence at Yale University and lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts. ~*Poetry Foundation*

"Circe's Torment"

I regret bitterly
 The years of loving you in both
 Your presence and absence, regret
 The law, the vocation
 That forbid me to keep you, the sea
 A sheet of glass, the sun-bleached
 Beauty of the Greek ships: how
 Could I have power if
 I had no wish
 To transform you: as
 You loved my body,
 As you found there
 Passion we held above
 All other gifts, in that single moment
 Over honor and hope, over
 Loyalty, in the name of that bond
 I refuse you

Such feeling for your wife
As will let you
Rest with her, I refuse you
Sleep again
If I cannot have you.

“Siren”

I became a criminal when I fell in love.
Before that I was a waitress.

I didn't want to go to Chicago with you.
I wanted to marry you, I wanted
Your wife to suffer.

I wanted her life to be like a play
In which all the parts are sad parts.

Does a good person
Think this way? I deserve

Credit for my courage--

I sat in the dark on your front porch.
Everything was clear to me:
If your wife wouldn't let you go
That proved she didn't love you.
If she loved you
Wouldn't she want you to be happy?

I think now
If I felt less I would be
A better person. I was
A good waitress.
I could carry eight drinks.

I used to tell you my dreams.
Last night I saw a woman sitting in a dark bus--
In the dream, she's weeping, the bus she's on
Is moving away. With one hand
She's waving; the other strokes
An egg carton full of babies.

The dream doesn't rescue the maiden.

from *Meadowlands*. © 1986 by Louise Glück.

Chapter 5 (UNIT 3): Language & Desire in Postmodern Fiction

5.1 Vladimir Nabokov (1899-1977)



Vladimir Nabokov was born in St. Petersburg, Russia. Nabokov's parents were wealthy and encouraged him to develop his imagination. He studied languages, mathematics, puzzles, and games, including chess, soccer, and boxing. He was educated by private tutors and read English before he read Russian. Interested in butterflies his entire life, he became a recognized authority on the subject while still young. Nabokov began writing poems when he was thirteen years old and, as he described it, "the numb fury of verse making first came over me." His first book of poetry was published in 1914. Nabokov's father, a lawyer and newspaper editor, was part of a failed movement to establish democracy (a system of government where the people rule) in Russia. The family lost its land and fortune after the Russian Revolution (a Communist overthrow of the government) in 1917 and fled to London, England, where Nabokov entered Cambridge University in 1919. Nabokov graduated in 1922 and rejoined his family in Berlin, Germany, where his father was shot to death by a monarchist (a believer in absolute rule by a single person). Nabokov married Vera Slonim in 1925. They had one son, Dmitri, who later became an opera singer. In Berlin Nabokov taught boxing, tennis, and languages and constructed crossword puzzles. He began writing under the name "V. Sirin," selling stories, poems, and essays to Russian-language newspapers in Berlin and then Paris, France. His work included translating different stories and poems into Russian and writing short stories, plays, novels, and criticism. In 1940 he moved his family to the United States.

From 1941 to 1948 he taught at Wellesley College in Massachusetts, where he became a professor of literature. He also did research in entomology (the study of insects) at the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard University in Massachusetts from 1942 to 1948. He later discovered several species of butterflies, including "Nabokov's wood nymph." While teaching he wrote his first English-language novel, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941), a parody of a mystery story whose hero is based on the author's own life. Nabokov became an American citizen in 1945. By then his stories were appearing regularly in popular magazines. Nabokov's 1947 novel *Bend Sinister* is about an intellectual's battle with a police state. In 1949 Nabokov was appointed professor of Russian and European literature at Cornell University in New York, where he taught until 1959. He wrote a book of memories of his life in Russia, *Speak, Memory*, in 1951. Several short sketches published in the *New Yorker* were put together in *Pnin* (1957), his novel about a Russian teaching at an American university.

Nabokov remained unknown to the general public until writing *Lolita*, an account of Humbert Humbert, a middle-aged professor who falls for a twelve-year-old schoolgirl. It was first published in Paris in 1955. After its American release in 1958, some U.S. libraries banned it. The publicity helped the book become immensely popular. Nabokov also wrote the screenplay for the 1962 movie version of the book. With profits from the novel and the film, Nabokov was able to quit teaching and devote himself entirely to his writing and butterfly hunting. In 1959 Nabokov published *Invitation to a Beheading*, a story of a man awaiting execution, which he had first written in Russian in 1938. In 1960 he moved his family to Montreux, Switzerland. He received critical praise for *Pale Fire* (1962), written as a 999-line poem with a long speech by an unstable New

England scholar who is actually a mythical king in exile. Nabokov constructed his novels like puzzles, rather than working from beginning to end. In 1964 he told *Life* magazine, "Writing has always been for me a torture and a pastime." Nabokov died on July 2, 1977, at the Palace Hotel in Montreaux. Nabokov's blending of various modernist elements and themes with postmodern sensibilities, his stylistic attention to detail, rich imagery often verging on the surreal, and his intricate metafictional puzzles, exerted a deep influence on many later postmodern and contemporary American writers.

(Source: <https://www.notablebiographies.com/Mo-Ni/Nabokov-Vladimir.html#ixzz5Xis2xr89>).

***Lolita* (1955)**

When it was published in 1955, *Lolita* immediately became a cause célèbre because of the freedom and sophistication with which it handled the unusual erotic predilections of its protagonist. But Vladimir Nabokov's wise, ironic, elegant masterpiece owes its stature as one of the twentieth century's novels of record not to the controversy its material aroused but to its author's use of that material to tell a love story almost shocking in its beauty and tenderness. Awe and exhilaration—along with heartbreak and mordant wit—abound in this account of the aging Humbert Humbert's obsessive, devouring, and doomed passion for the nymphet Dolores Haze. *Lolita* is also the story of a hypercivilized European colliding with the cheerful barbarism of postwar America, but most of all, it is a meditation on love—love as outrage and hallucination, madness and transformation.

Lolita has become a permanent part of the American literary canon, and indeed of the American language, with its capacity to dazzle, baffle, and at times shock the unwary reader. The shocks that *Lolita* delivers are not solely moral ones. Humbert Humbert kidnaps and seduces (if not rapes) his fourteen-year-old stepdaughter, Dolores Haze; estranges his victim from her family and friends and robs her of her childhood; plots one murder and successfully carries out another. The morality of these events is never in doubt. What is in doubt is how much of Humbert's version of these events—and how much of Humbert himself—we can believe. For just as Nabokov's preeningly perverse narrator wraps a straitjacket of deception around Charlotte and Dolores Haze only to find himself duped in turn, so readers of *Lolita* discover that nothing in this book is quite what it at first seems to be. Coincidences coincide once too often; fate (or, as Humbert would have it, "McFate") obtrudes a shade too obtrusively; the border between memory and imagination, fact and fabulation, is crossed and recrossed until those categories come to look like the most fragile semantic conceits. Finally, *Lolita*'s plot is unmasked as a "plot" of another sort, a game played by an author whose powers of control are so awesome that they seem to extend beyond the page, leaving us with the uncomfortable sensation that we are not just Nabokov's readers, but his characters.

Reading and Review Questions

1. *Lolita* begins with an earnest foreword, purportedly written by one John Ray, Jr., Ph.D., author of *Do the Senses Make Sense?* (whose initials—"J.R., Jr."—echo as suspiciously as "Humbert Humbert"). Why might Nabokov have chosen to frame his novel in this fashion? What is the effect of knowing that the narrative's three main characters are already dead—and, in a sense, nonexistent, since their names have been changed?
2. Why might Nabokov have chosen to name his protagonist "Humbert Humbert"? Does the name's parodic double rumble end up distancing us from its owner's depravity? Is it

harder to take evil seriously when it goes under an outlandish name? What uses, comic and poetic, does Nabokov make of this name in the course of *Lolita*?

3. Humbert's confession is written in an extraordinary language. It is by turns colloquial and archaic, erudite and stilted, florid and sardonic. It is studded with French expressions, puns in several other languages, and allusions to authors from Petrarch to Joyce. Is this language merely an extension of Nabokov's own—which the critic Michael Wood describes as “a fabulous, freaky, singing, acrobatic, unheard-of English” (Michael Wood, *The Magician's Doubts: Nabokov and the Risks of Fiction*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995, p. 5.)—or is Humbert's language appropriate to his circumstances and motives? In what way does it obfuscate as much as it reveals? And if Humbert's prose is indeed a veil, at what points is this veil lifted and what do we glimpse behind it?
4. Humbert attributes his pedophilia (or “nympholepsy”) to his tragically aborted childhood romance with Annabel Leigh. How far can we trust this explanation? How do we reconcile Humbert's reliance on the Freudian theory of psychic trauma with his corrosive disdain for psychiatrists?
5. In the early stages of his obsession Humbert sees Lolita merely as a new incarnation of Annabel, even making love to her on different beaches as he tries to symbolically consummate his earlier passion. In what other ways does Humbert remain a prisoner of the past? Does he ever succeed in escaping it? Why is Lolita singularly impervious to the past, to the extent that she can even shrug off the abuse inflicted on her by both Humbert and Quilty?
6. How does Humbert's marriage to Valeria foreshadow his relationships with both Charlotte and Lolita? How does the revelation of Valeria's infidelity prepare us for Lolita's elopement with Quilty? Why does Humbert respond so differently to these betrayals?
7. On page 31 we encounter the first of the “dazzling coincidences” that illuminate Lolita like flashes of lightning (or perhaps stage lightning), when Humbert flips through a copy of *Who's Who in the Limelight* in the prison library. What is the significance of each of the entries for “Roland Pym,” “Clare Quilty,” and “Dolores Quine.” In what ways do their names, biographies, and credits prefigure the novel's subsequent developments? Who is the mysterious “Vivian Darkbloom,” whose name is an anagram for “Vladimir Nabokov”? Where else in *Lolita* does Nabokov provide us with imaginary texts that seem to lend verisimilitude to Humbert's narrative and at the same time make us question the factuality of the world in which it is set?
8. Humbert Humbert is an émigré. Not only has he left Europe for America, but in the course of *Lolita* he becomes an erotic refugee, fleeing the stability of Ramsdale and Beardsley for a life in motel rooms and highway rest stops. How does this fact shape his responses to the book's other characters and their responses to him? To what extent is the America of *Lolita* an exile's America? In what ways is Humbert's foreignness a corollary of his perversion? Is it possible to see *Lolita* as Nabokov's veiled meditation on his own exile?
9. We also learn that Humbert is mad—mad enough, at least, to have been committed to several mental institutions, where he took great pleasure in misleading his psychiatrists. Is Humbert's madness an aspect of his sexual deviance or is it something more fundamental? Can we trust a story told by an insane narrator?

10. What makes Charlotte Haze so repugnant to Humbert? Does the author appear to share Humbert's antagonism? Does he ever seem to criticize it? In what ways does Charlotte embody the Russian word *poshlust* which Nabokov translated as "not only the obviously trashy but also the falsely important, the falsely beautiful, the falsely clever, the falsely attractive?" (Cited by Alfred Appel, Jr., in *The Annotated Lolita*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970, pp. xlix-1.)
11. To describe Lolita and other alluring young girls, Humbert coins the word "nymphet." The word has two derivations: the first from the Greek and Roman nature spirits, who were usually pictured as beautiful maidens dwelling in mountains, waters, and forests; the second from the entomologist's term for the young of an insect undergoing incomplete metamorphosis. Note the book's numerous allusions to fairy tales and spells; the proliferation of names like "Elphinstone," "Pisky," and "The Enchanted Hunters," as well as Humbert's repeated sightings of moths and butterflies. Also note that Nabokov was a passionate lepidopterist, who identified and named at least one new species of butterfly. How does the character of Lolita combine mythology and entomology? In what ways does Lolita resemble both an elf and an insect? What are some of this novel's themes of enchantment and metamorphosis as they apply both to Lolita and Humbert, and perhaps to the reader as well?
12. Before Humbert actually beds his nymphet, there is an extraordinary scene, at once rhapsodic, repulsive, and hilarious, in which Humbert excites himself to sexual climax while a (presumably) unaware Lolita wriggles in his lap. How is this scene representative of their ensuing relationship? What is the meaning of the sentence "Lolita had been safely solipsized" [p. 60], "solipsism" being the epistemological theory that the self is the sole arbiter of "reality"? Is all of *Lolita* the monologue of a pathological solipsist who is incapable of imagining any reality but his own or of granting other people any existence outside his own desires?
13. Can Humbert ever be said to "love" Lolita? Does he ever perceive her as a separate being? Is the reader ever permitted to see her in ways that Humbert cannot?
14. Humbert meets Lolita while she resides at 342 Lawn Street, seduces her in room 342 of The Enchanted Hunters, and in one year on the road the two of them check into 342 motels. Before Lolita begins her affair with Clare Quilty, her mother mentions his uncle Ivor, the town dentist, and sends Lolita to summer at Camp Q (near the propitiously named Lake Climax). These are just a few of the coincidences that make *Lolita* so profoundly unsettling. Why might Nabokov deploy coincidence so liberally in this book? Does he use it as a convenient way of advancing plot or in order to call the entire notion of a "realistic" narrative into question? How do Nabokov's games of coincidence tie in with his use of literary allusion (see Questions 4, 15, and 16) and self-reference (see Question 7)?
15. Having plotted Charlotte's murder and failed to carry it out, Humbert is rid of her by means of a bizarre, and bizarrely fortuitous, accident. Is this the only time that fate makes a spectacular intrusion on Humbert's behalf? Are there occasions when fate conspires to thwart him? Is the fate that operates in this novel—a fate so preposterously hyperactive that Humbert gives it a name—actually an extension of Humbert's will, perhaps of his unconscious will? Is Humbert in a sense guilty of Charlotte's death? Discuss the broader question of culpability as it resonates throughout this book.

16. Quilty makes his first onstage appearance at *The Enchanted Hunters*, just before Humbert beds Lolita for the first time. Yet rumors and allusions precede him. Does the revelation of Quilty's identity come as a surprise? Is it the true climax of *Lolita*? How does Nabokov prepare us for this revelation? Since the mystery of Quilty's identity turns this novel into a kind of detective story (in which the protagonist is both detective and criminal), it may be useful to compare *Lolita* to other examples of the genre, such as Poe's "The Purloined Letter," Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories, or Agatha Christie's *A Murder Is Announced*, all of which are alluded to in the text.
17. Among our early clues about Quilty is his resemblance to Humbert (or Humbert's resemblance to him). This resemblance is one of the reasons that Lolita finds her mother's boarder attractive, and we are reminded of it later on when Humbert believes for a brief time that Quilty may be his uncle Trapp. How does Quilty conform to the archetype of the double or Doppelgänger? In its literary incarnations, a double may represent the protagonist's evil underself or his higher nature. What sort of double is Quilty? Are we ever given the impression that Humbert may be Quilty's double?
18. If we accept Humbert at his word, Lolita initiates their first sexual encounter, seducing him after he has balked at violating her in her sleep. Yet later Humbert admits that Lolita sobbed in the night—"every night, every night—the moment I feigned sleep" [p. 176]. Should we read this reversal psychologically: that what began as a game for Lolita has now become a terrible and inescapable reality? Or has Humbert been lying to us from the first? What is the true nature of the crimes committed against Lolita? Does Humbert ever genuinely repent them, or is even his remorse a sham? Does Lolita forgive Humbert or only forget him?
19. Humbert is not only Lolita's debaucher but her stepfather and, after Charlotte's death, the closest thing she has to a parent. What kind of parent is he? How does his behavior toward the girl increasingly come to resemble Charlotte's? Why, during their last meeting, does Lolita dismiss the erotic aspect of their relationship and "grant" only that Humbert was a good father?
20. As previously mentioned, *Lolita* abounds with games: the games Humbert plays with his psychiatrists, his games of chess with Gaston Godin, the transcontinental games of tag and hide-and-go-seek that Quilty plays with Humbert, and the slapstick game of Quilty's murder. There is Humbert's poignant outburst, "I have only words to play with!" [p. 32]. In what way does this novel itself resemble a vast and intricate game, a game played with words? Is Nabokov playing with his readers or against them? How does such an interpretation alter your experience of *Lolita*? Do its game-like qualities detract from its emotional seriousness or actually heighten it?
21. The last lines of *Lolita* are: "I am thinking of aurochs and angels, the secret of durable pigments, prophetic sonnets, the refuge of art. And this is the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita" [p. 309]. What is the meaning of this passage? What does art offer Humbert and his beloved that sexual passion cannot? Is this aesthetic appeal merely the mask with which Humbert conceals or justifies his perversion, or is the immortality of art the thing that Humbert and his creator have been seeking all along? In what ways is *Lolita* at once a meditation on, and a re-creation of, the artistic process?

Chapter 6 (UNIT 4): Race, Gender, and Nation in Contemporary African American Fiction

6.1 Toni Morrison (b. 1931)



The first African-American to win a Nobel Prize for Literature, Toni Morrison is one of the most important American authors of the past century. In the eleven exquisitely crafted novels she has published to date, Morrison combines folk and postmodernist storytelling techniques to explore what it means to be both black and a woman in America. Morrison was born in Loraine, Ohio, and earned a Bachelor's degree in English from Howard University and a Master's Degree from Cornell University. Although she began writing creative fiction at Howard, Morrison worked primarily as a college professor in the decade following her graduation from Cornell, teaching at Texas Southern University and then at Howard. In 1964, Morrison divorced the husband she met at Howard, moved to New York, and worked as a senior editor for Random House publishers, where she championed the writing of several notable African-American authors including Angela Davis and Toni Cade Bambara. Morrison continued to write and teach at colleges while working at Random House, publishing her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, in 1970. Since then she has taught at numerous institutions, including schools in the New York state university system, Yale, Bard, and finally Princeton, where she is currently an emerita professor. In addition to working as an editor, novelist, and professor, Morrison is also a prolific essayist and public intellectual, publishing editorials in venues such as *The New York Times* and appearing on popular TV programs such as *The Late Show* with Stephen Colbert. She has also written three children's books with her son, Slade Morrison, and the libretto for an opera based on the life of the American slave Margaret Garner, who is also the inspiration for her Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *Beloved* (1987). Morrison describes the postmodernist literary technique she has developed in her novels as that of "enchantment," a blending of historical realism with the myths and supernatural tales she learned as a child. "That's the way the world was for me and for the black people I knew," she tells Christina Davis in a 1986 interview in *Conversations with Toni Morrison*. "There was this other knowledge or perception, always discredited but nevertheless there, which informed their sensibilities and clarified their activities...they had some sweet, intimate connection with things that were not empirically verifiable."

Examples of enchantment abound in Morrison's work. In her novel *Song of Solomon* (1977), a story of a man coming to terms with his African American identity, one character gives birth to herself—and thus does not have a navel—while another learns to fly as legendary African tribesmen once did. In *Tar Baby* (1981), a novel about people who trap themselves in self-deceptions, Morrison structures her tale around the African American fable of the trickster rabbit who gets caught by a deceptive figure made out of tar. *Beloved*, the first book in Morrison's American trilogy, is a powerful novel about the legacy of slavery, the ghost of a slain baby haunts the home of an escaped slave. *Paradise*, the third book in the trilogy (preceded by *Jazz*), was Morrison's first novel since she was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. It opens with a horrifying scene of mob violence then chronicles its genesis in a small all-black town in rural Oklahoma. Founded by descendants of free slaves as intent on isolating themselves from the outside world as it once was on rejecting them, the patriarchal community of Ruby is built on

righteousness, rigidly enforced moral law, and fear. But seventeen miles away, another group of exiles has gathered in a promised land of their own. And it is upon these women in flight from death and despair that nine male citizens of Ruby will lay their pain, their terror, and their murderous rage. *Paradise* is a tour de force of storytelling power, richly imagined and elegantly composed. Morrison challenges our most fiercely held beliefs as she weaves folklore and history, memory and myth, into an unforgettable meditation on race, religion, gender, and the way a society can turn on itself until it is forced to explode. (*From the publisher.*)

Reading and Review Questions

1. Why has Morrison chosen to use the poem “for many are the pleasant forms...” as an epigraph for this novel? What is the meaning of the novel's title within the context of the book? Why does Morrison imply that it is impossible to create a paradise on earth?
2. What is the significance of the Oven? Why does Morrison treat it as a proper noun? What sorts of images -- positive and negative -- does an oven conjure up, and how do you think these images relate to some of the novel's themes? How does the significance of the Oven to the town change over the years?
3. What new ways of thinking does Richard Misner represent, and how is he received by the people of Ruby? When Patricia tells him that “Slavery is our past” (212), he insists that “We live in the world.... The whole world.” Which of them is right? What does Misner mean when he says the people of Ruby love their children “to death” (212)?
4. Why does Sweetie make for the Convent when she finds herself at the breaking point? Why does she then try to get away from the Convent, and then tell the people of Ruby that the women there are evil?
5. What does the school nativity play tell us about the way Ruby mythologizes itself? Why does Patricia burn her research on the history of the Ruby and Haven families?
6. How does the death of Sweetie and Jeff's daughter Save-Marie subtly change Ruby? What sort of a future do you envision for the town? Is it possible to see the murders at the Convent as ultimately helping Ruby to evolve and to survive?
7. Why do the men who attack the Convent fear its “sheer destructive power” (17)? It is clear that the Convent, and the women who have taken refuge there, are not destructive. What is the destructive element in Ruby, and what is it destroying?
8. What do you think lies behind the door or window that Anna and Misner notice as they leave the Convent? Why do they choose not to open it?
9. Members of the conservative faction in Ruby ultimately find it impossible to keep the impact of the Sixties from affecting their town. What “Sixties” ideas turn out to be the most powerful, or the most resonant, for the people of Ruby? Do these ideas destroy the town's social cohesion or give it new strength? What do you think will become of Ruby, and would you describe *Paradise* as a novel of hope or despair?
10. A striking image in the novel is that of the road between Ruby and the Convent. It is straight and long and lonely, yet Morrison places many pivotal scenes along its path. What are some of these scenes? Who walks the road and who drives it? How do men use the road as opposed to women? What is significant about the difference?

6.2 Colson Whitehead (b. 1969)



Colson Whitehead is one of the most celebrated and respected contemporary American authors of his generation. He was born and raised in Manhattan, and after graduating from Harvard College, he started working at the *Village Voice*, where he wrote reviews of television, books, and music. His first novel, *The Intuitionist*, concerned intrigue in the Department of Elevator Inspectors, and was a finalist for the PEN/Hemingway and a winner of the Quality Paperback Book Club's New Voices Award. *John Henry Days* followed in 2001, an investigation of the steel-driving man of American folklore. It was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award, the Los Angeles Times Fiction Award, and the Pulitzer Prize. The novel received the Young Lions Fiction Award and the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award. *The Colossus* of New York is a book of essays about the city. It was published in 2003 and was a New York Times Notable Book of the Year. *Apex Hides the Hurt* (2006) is a novel about a "nomenclature consultant" who gets an assignment to name a town, and was a recipient of the PEN/Oakland Award. *Sag Harbor*, published in 2009, is a novel about teenagers hanging out in Sag Harbor, Long Island during the summer of 1985. It was a finalist for the PEN/Faulkner award and the Hurston/Wright Legacy Award. *Zone One* (2011), about post-apocalyptic New York City, was a New York Times Bestseller. *The Noble Hustle: Poker, Beef Jerky & Death*, a non-fiction account of the 2011 World Series of Poker, appeared in 2014. *The Underground Railroad* was published in the summer of 2016. It won the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, the Carnegie Medal for Fiction, and was a #1 New York Times Bestseller. His latest novel *The Nickel Boys* will be published in July 2019.

Whitehead has received a MacArthur Fellowship, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and a fellowship at the Cullman Center for Scholars and Writers. He has taught at the University of Houston, Columbia University, Brooklyn College, Hunter College, New York University, Princeton University, Wesleyan University, and been a Writer-in-Residence at Vassar College, the University of Richmond, and the University of Wyoming. He lives in New York City. (<https://www.colsonwhitehead.com/new-page/>).

***The Underground Railroad* (2016)—Book**

See class calendar for reading schedule.

Similar to *Paradise*, questions of love, community, and survival are of equal relevance to Colson Whitehead's novel, *The Underground Railroad* (2016)—winner of the Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award—and with this book we end the unit as we began, with historical fiction, while also returning to where we started off in this class with an examination of the legacy of slavery, calls for racial equality, and the question of what it means to be "American." The novel's protagonist, Cora, is a young slave on a cotton plantation in Georgia. When Caesar, a slave who has recently arrived from Virginia, urges her to join him on the Underground Railroad, she seizes the opportunity and escapes with him. In Whitehead's ingenious conception, the Underground Railroad is no mere metaphor: engineers and conductors operate a secret network of actual tracks and tunnels beneath the Southern soil. Cora embarks on a harrowing flight from one state to the next, encountering strange yet familiar iterations of her own world at each stop. As Whitehead re-

creates the terrors of the antebellum era, he weaves in the saga of our nation, from the brutal abduction of Africans to the unfulfilled promises of the present day. *The Underground Railroad* is both the gripping tale of one woman's will to escape the horrors of bondage—and a powerful meditation on the history we all share (summary of novel from Penguin Random House). Reading the entirety of Whitehead's novel presents the opportunity to reflect on many of the themes, texts, and contexts that we have explored throughout this class, yet simultaneously situates our understanding, along with the other readings from this last unit, of where contemporary American fiction is right now and where it might be headed.

Reading and Review Questions

1. How does the depiction of slavery in *The Underground Railroad* compare to other depictions in literature and film? The scenes on Randall's plantation are horrific—how did the writing affect you as a reader? Do you feel you have a better understanding of what slavery was like?
2. In North Carolina, institutions like doctor's offices and museums that were supposed to help 'black uplift' were corrupt and unethical. How do Cora's challenges in North Carolina mirror what America is still struggling with today?
3. Cora constructs elaborate daydreams about her life as a free woman and dedicates herself to reading and expanding her education. What role do you think stories play for Cora and other travelers using the underground railroad?
4. How does Ethel's backstory, her relationship with slavery and Cora's use of her home affect you? What are your impressions of John Valentine's vision for the farm? When speaking of Valentine's Farm, Cora explains "Even if the adults were free of the shackles that held them fast, bondage had stolen too much time. Only the children could take full advantage of their dreaming. If the white men let them." What makes this so impactful both in the novel and today? What do you think about Terrance Randall's fate?
5. How do you feel about Cora's mother's decision to run away? How does your opinion of Cora's mother change once you've learned about her fate?
6. Whitehead creates emotional instability for the reader: if things are going well, you get comfortable before a sudden tragedy. What does this sense of fear do to you as you're reading? Who do you connect with most in the novel and why? How does the state-by-state structure impact your reading process? Does it remind you of any other works of literature?
7. Why do you think the author chose to portray a literal railroad? How did this aspect of magical realism impact your concept of how the real underground railroad worked? Does the novel change the way you look at the history of America, especially in the time of slavery and abolitionism?

GLOSSARY

- American Communist Party:** The American Wing of the Communist Party, extremely influential in American politics in the early twentieth century.
- Armistice:** An agreement to stop fighting. The Armistice to end World War 1 (The Great War) signed on November 11, 1918.
- Atlanta Compromise:** A controversial agreement in 1895 between Booker T. Washington and Southern political leaders that exchanged basic protections for African-Americans for a continuation of white political rule.
- Atlanta Exposition:** Also called the Cotton States and International Exposition took place from 18 September to 31 December 1895 in Atlanta, Georgia to promote the technological and agricultural abilities of the Southern states and to encourage trade with Latin America.
- Beat Literature:** Represented in this book by Allen Ginsberg, Beat Literature is the product of a group of mid-twentieth century authors known as the Beat Generation, whose members also include the well-known novelists Jack Kerouac and William S. Burroughs. Authors of the Beat Generation represented America's countercultures while critiquing its materialism during the era of cultural conformity and national prosperity that followed World War II.
- Cadence:** The natural rhythm or modulation of a line of poetry.
- Civil War:** The American Civil War was fought between northern states (known as Union forces) and Southern states (known as the Confederacy) from 1861 to 1865. The Civil War pitted the eleven states of the Confederate States of America against the twenty states of the Union (also known as the United States or the Federal Army) over the question of slavery. The war began in Charleston, South Carolina on 12 April 1861 and ended officially at Appomattox Courthouse, Virginia on 9 April 1865.
- Cold War:** The Cold War is the decades-long military and cultural conflict that developed soon after World War II between the United States and the Soviet Union. During the Cold War, the United States sought to contain the threat of Soviet Communism through military policies such as nuclear deterrence and domestic policies such as the formation of the House Un-American Activities Committee. The Cold War ended with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991.
- Cubism:** A popular style of painting made famous by Pablo Picasso. Instead of realistic representation, objects are depicted in an abstract style, often fractional and cube-like.
- Dust Bowl:** Severe storms and drought that affected American agriculture in the 1930s at the height of the Great Depression. The 'Dust Bowl' usually referred to the Great Plains and Midwest, which was most affected.
- Emancipation:** The process by which an individual or community is set free from slavery or some other form of legal confinement.
- Epigraph:** A brief quotation preceding a literary work. For example, T.S. Eliot's 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' begins with a brief epigraph from Dante's *Inferno*.
- Explicit:** The opposite of implicit, the term explicit refers to things that are clearly and directly stated.

Fauvism: A French style of art, specifically painting, made popular during Modernism, emphasizing color over representation.

Federal Writers' Project: A federal project to support writers during the Great Depression.

Feminism: The advocacy of equality between the sexes. In the United States, feminism can be defined as a series of social, cultural, economic, and political movements that emphasized and called for equality for women.

Free Verse: A poetic form, commonly associated with Walt Whitman and more modern poets, that does not conform to a regular rhythm or set line length. Free verse is often said to suggest the form of ordinary speech.

G.I. Bill: Known formally as The Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944, the so-called G.I. Bill provided benefits to servicemen returning from World War II such as funds for college tuition and affordable home and business loans.

Gravitas: Gravitas refers to a quality of seriousness and dignity, as well as a sense of substance and importance, that someone or something may possess.

Great Migration: A major population shift as many Southerners, including a large population of African-Americans, moved from rural Southern states to urban Northeastern, Midwestern and even Western metropolitan areas.

Great War: Another name for World War 1, which lasted from 1914-1918.

Guggenheim Fellowship: Guggenheim Fellowships are prestigious, multi-thousand-dollar grants awarded since 1925 from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation to scholars and artists of exceptional ability.

Harlem Renaissance: A cultural and artistic movement, originating in Harlem in the 1920s, which exposed many African-American artists and musicians to a larger audience. Harlem: A neighborhood in New York City, influenced culturally by its African American population

High Modernism: Modernist works that, while more formal, look at the modern era as a period of loss. High modernists realize that the world has changed so much, it is impossible to return to the old ways.

Iconoclast: An iconoclast is a highly independent non-conformist who may rebel against or criticize the status quo.

Imagery: A type of figurative language that invokes a visual image or memory.

Imagism: A movement amongst Modernist poets to focus in on precise images. Ezra Pound's "In a Station of the Metro" is a famous example of imagism.

Immigration: America saw a steep rise in immigration in the nineteenth century, as people from other countries moved to America for a variety of personal and political reasons but primarily to find work in America's growing industries, including the building of the transcontinental railroad.

Implicit. The opposite of explicit, the term implicit refers to things that are implied but not directly expressed.

Industrial Age: In America, the rise of industry in the mid to late nineteenth century and beyond caused a shift in America from a primarily agrarian economy to an industrial economy.

Industrialization: In America, industrialization can be seen as the process by which advances in technology in the nineteenth century led to the shift from farm production to manufacturing production.

Jazz Age: Another name for the 1920s in which Jazz became a popular form of music. Also known as “The Roaring 20s,” the Jazz Age is said to have died when the Great Depression occurred.

Jim Crow Laws: Named after a popular racist caricature of the nineteenth century, Jim Crow refers to the racist laws enacted in the states of the American South after Reconstruction that enforced the racial segregation of society under the specious rationale that black and white Americans could be “separate but equal.” Jim Crow laws were nullified by the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Karl Marx: Karl Marx, who was born in Prussia and later lived in London, was a nineteenth century philosopher whose political and economic theories (collectively known as Marxism) formed the basis of the modern practice of Communism. Marx’s views on class struggle and power were highly influential during the nineteenth century and beyond.

Korean War: Fought from June of 1950 to July of 1953, The Korean War was a war between North and South Korea, the two parts of Korea that were formed after World War II. The Soviet Union supported the Communist government of North Korea while the United States supported, and sent troops to fight for, its ally South Korea. The Korean War is often seen as an escalation of the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States. There was no victor in the Korean War and the country of Korea remains divided between North and South to this day.

Low Modernism: Modernist work that is less formal and experiments with form.

Lyric: A short poem that often expresses a single theme such as the speaker’s mood or feeling.

Make It New!: A phrase from poet Ezra Pound which becomes the mantra of the modernists.

Metafiction: Metafiction is a literary technique in which a story’s narrator draws attention to her own act of storytelling, explicitly foregrounding within her narrative the usually implicit processes with which stories are told.

Meter: The regular pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables found in a line of poetry. Free verse is notable for the absence of meter.

Modernism: a global movement centered in the United States and Europe, for literature written during the two wars, which is said to be the first industrialized modern period.

Modernist: An artist associated with the Modernism time period.

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP): founded in 1909 by a group of prominent African-Americans, including W.E.B. DuBois who responded to the wave of punitive laws and restrictive ordinances enacted against African-Americans after the end of Reconstruction. The founders of the NAACP opposed Booker T. Washington’s Atlanta Compromise on the grounds that it did not do enough to protect African-Americans from discriminatory laws and practices.

National Book Award: Starting in 1936, the ever-changing National Book Awards have been awarded annually by various organizations within the publishing industry and, since 1988, by the non-profit National Book Foundation to honor books written exclusively by American authors that have sold well or otherwise merit critical acclaim.

Nobel Prize: An international award granted for major artistic, cultural and scientific advances. Arguably the most prestigious literary award on Earth, the Nobel Prize in Literature is part of a set of annual awards named after the Swedish inventor Alfred Nobel, whose will created the prize. The prize in literature is awarded by the Swedish Academy to an individual author whose lifetime of work has made an outstanding contribution to the arts of letters. To date, thirteen Americans have received the Nobel Prize in literature, Sinclair Lewis being the first in 1930 and Toni Morrison being the latest in 1993.

Passing: “Passing” is a historical term that describes the process by which light-skinned African-Americans could pass as whites.

PEN/Faulkner Award: In 1980, the PEN/Faulkner Foundation was created after the publishing industry changed the voting rules for the National Book Award to encourage awarding only bestselling books. Since then the Foundation has recognized the best work of the year written by a living American citizen with the PEN/Faulkner Award. The acronym PEN stands for Poets, Essayists, and Novelists.

Postmodernism: The term postmodernism refers both to works of culture that were created since the 1950s following the innovations of Modernism, and to the high-tech, global, cold-warring, consumerist mass-media society that arose in the decades following World War II. In literature, Postmodernism refers to a style of writing such as one finds in the work of Donald Barthelme and David Foster Wallace that employs the experimental techniques of the Modernists in a decidedly playful manner, foregrounding the role that language, text, and technique play in the creation of fiction, poetry, and drama. The term also refers to works such as Don DeLillo’s that represents how absurd, overwhelming, and disorienting postmodern society can be.

Prose: A term used for writing which does not fit the poetic structure (does not use metric verse or free verse).

Pulitzer Prize: A very prestigious award for journalism, literature or music granted each year from Columbia University. Established in 1918 in the will of the publisher Joseph Pulitzer and managed by Columbia University, the Pulitzer Prize is awarded annually to writers, journalists, and composers of exemplary works of literature, journalism, and music respectively.

Racial Inequality: The inferior treatment of another person due to their racial heritage.

Realism: Realism is a type of writing that achieved prominence after the American Civil War. Reacting against the Romantic era of writing that preceded them, Realists rejected Romantic features of emotionalism and idealism. Realists also rejected the creation of larger-than-life characters who were unrealistically all good or all bad. Influenced by Local Color and Regional writers, Realists paid attention to details and accuracy in describing people and places, and they developed characters who used ordinary speech in dialogue, commensurate to the character’s social class. However, the Realists moved beyond Local Color and Regional writers in their more complex development of realistic characterization. Characters in Realist stories resembled ordinary people (neither all good nor all bad), often of the middle class, living in ordinary circumstances, who experienced plausible real-life struggles and who often, as in life, were unable to find resolution to their conflicts. In Realistic stories, the plot was formed from the exploration of a character working through or reacting to a particular issue or struggle. In other words, character often drove the plot of the story. Characters in Realistic fiction were three-dimensional, and their inner lives were often revealed through an objective, omniscient narrator. In a Realist story, there are rarely any indications of Romantic features such as nostalgia, sentimentality, or neatly resolved endings.

Reconstruction: The period of American history from the end of the Civil War in 1865 until the formal removal of the U.S. Army from the territory of the former Confederate States of America on 31 March 1877.

Satire: Satire is the use of humor, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose human ignorance, vice, or foolishness—as well as other human weaknesses.

Segregation: The enforced separation of groups of persons based on race.

Signs: In poststructuralist philosophies such as Jacques Derrida's Deconstructionism, language is composed not of words that exactly define specific, concrete things but instead of signs that refer always to other signs in a so-called "chain of signification." The meanings of words-as-signs are thus linguistically and historically relative, indefinite, and prone to change because they refer not to actual things but to long, historically produced assemblages of signs/words.

Slavery: A legal and economic system in which certain individuals are treated as a legally considered property of others. This form of slavery is also called chattel slavery.

Stephen Crane Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC): The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee was an influential organization of students during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, organizing public protests such as sit-ins and marches on Washington, D.C. as well as freedom rides and voter registration drives.

Talented Tenth: A term from W.E.B. DuBois' essay, 'The Talented Tenth,' referring to the top 10% of African-Americans as cultural and political leaders. It was used widely during the Harlem Renaissance.

The Great Depression: A period of national economic depression beginning with the Stock Market Crash of 1929 and lasting throughout the 1930s.

The New Deal: A series of federally funded programs started by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt during the Great Depression to build infrastructure and create jobs for the nation.

Transcontinental Railroad: The Transcontinental Railroad was a network of railroads completed in the nineteenth century that stretched across the country and united America by rail.

Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute: A school for the education of African-Americans living in the former confederacy founded by Booker T. Washington at Tuskegee, Alabama in 1881. The school exists today as Tuskegee University.

Woman Suffrage Movement: a movement that began in the mid-nineteenth century, with a focus on achieving for women the legal right to vote. Led to the adoption of the nineteenth amendment of the U.S. Constitution.

World War I: The first global war, (1914-1918). World War I included 9 million combatants and changed the face of modern warfare. It had a major economic, political and artistic impact on the entire world, especially Europe.

World War II: World War II, also known as The Second World War, was a global "total war" involving all the major nations of the world. The United States, The Soviet Union, and Britain were allies during the war, and this coalition of "Allied" powers were victorious over the "Axis" powers of Germany, Japan, Italy and their allies. The war was fought between 1939 and 1945, resulting in up to eighty million deaths.