

THE AMERICAN EXPERIENCE:
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THE AMERICAN EXPERIENCE: FICTION

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Introduction

The end of the American Revolution did not mark a clean break between America and England. English influences on the newly formed country lingered on for many years. America's literature was hardly distinguishable from the literature of England until the nineteenth century, when a distinctly different type of American literature evolved. In contrast to the primarily religious writings of the seventeenth century and the primarily political writings of the eighteenth century, the writings of the nineteenth century showed the development of fiction as a major literary genre in American literature.

In the earliest works of fiction, writers such as Irving, Cooper, Poe, and Hawthorne emphasized individualism, emotionalism, nature, and the supernatural. Romanticism was the dominant strain. However, the best literature of a nation is a reflection of the characteristics of the life and people of that nation and as the harsh realities of westward expansion, civil war, and industrialism began to alter the American way of life, American fiction took on a tougher, more realistic aspect. In the latter part of the nineteenth century, writers such as Bret Harte and Mark Twain introduced the vigorous language and broad humor of the frontier in stories which more accurately portrayed the American character. Such realistic depictions of peculiarly American themes remained the dominant characteristic of American literature into the twentieth century. Modern American fiction has remained largely realistic, but the experimentations and explorations of such writers as Henry James, Ernest Hemingway, and William Faulkner in psychology, symbolism, and literary technique have kept the genre dynamic and open to further development.

In the first section of this volume, you will meet three of the most outstanding authors of the twentieth century—Ernest Hemingway,

John Steinbeck, and William Faulkner. Each of these writers has received both the highest national award—the Pulitzer Prize—and the highest international award—the Nobel Prize for Literature. Few writers in this century have equaled their achievements or success within the genre of fiction. Though they wrote in the period from the 1930's through the 1960's, their work still influences much of the fiction being written at the present time.

Having introduced you to writing that marks a high point in the development of American fiction to date, this book then explores the rich heritage that gave rise to modern American fiction. A selection of some of the most significant authors and themes in each period of literary development are offered for you to explore and enjoy. The final two sections of the book examine recent achievements and experiments in fiction by some of today's leading writers who are carrying on the tradition of Steinbeck, Hemingway, and Faulkner.

Many of the writers included in this anthology are best known for their achievements in the novel form. However, most of them have also written in the short story form with equal success. Wherever possible, each writer is represented by one of his successful short stories, because this form is better suited to what is a rather brief anthology. Only in those few cases where an author is known solely as a novelist has an excerpt from one of his longer works been included.

THREE DISTINGUISHED MODERNS

Though the twentieth century has produced a number of significant writers of American fiction, few have reached the distinction of Ernest Hemingway, John Steinbeck, and William Faulkner. Each has an impressive list of works to his credit, and each has been awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in recognition of his achievement. However much readers may disagree about the relative merits of their particular works, these men are regarded in America and in Europe as three of the most influential figures in contemporary fiction.

All three writers became prominent during the years immediately preceding and following the depression of 1929, and continued their literary careers into the 1960's. In their lifetime, they knew the feeling of alienation that World War I produced in the so-called "lost generation" of the 1920's. They experienced prosperity and depression. They saw totalitarianism rise in Europe out of economic despair to threaten man's progress toward a civilized and humane life. They came through World War II with a mature and sensitive

4 ☞ Three Distinguished Moderns

awareness of the human condition at mid-century. In 1950, William Faulkner stated the modern dilemma in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech: "There is only one question: When will I be blown up?" He then went on to affirm his faith in mankind, an affirmation welcomed everywhere by men of good will:

I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance.

In 1921 a symposium of scholars, engaged in an impressive research project called *Civilization in the United States*, concluded that, for the artist-intellectual, "life in America is not worth living." In the middle twenties ERNEST HEMINGWAY, self-exiled to Europe as a member of the "lost generation," was the literary representative of this "romantic disillusion" and "set the favorite pose for the period."¹ He gained this reputation because of what he wrote and also because of the prose style he developed. His style has been widely imitated in modern literature, especially by the so-called "hard-boiled" school of writers. A fellow writer described it this way:

Hemingway's words strike you, each one, as if they were pebbles fetched fresh from a brook. They live and shine, each in its place. So one of his pages has the effect of a brookbottom into which you look down through the flowing water. The words form a tessellation,² each in order before the other.³

Hemingway's spare, muscular style was ideal for his stories of initiation into the cruelty of life, a cruelty that each individual must learn to endure with courage. This theme appeared in his earliest stories of hunting and fishing in the Michigan woods. It was reinforced by the dangerous ex-

¹Edmund Wilson, *The Wound and the Bow: Seven Studies in Literature* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1941), p. 221.

²tessellation: mosaic

³Ford Madox Ford, quoted by Charles Poore, "Foreword," *The Hemingway Reader* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), p. xiv.

periences with bull-fighting, big-game hunting, and war that always fascinated Hemingway. He made the drama of a moment—sometimes of a lifetime—hinge on “some principle of courage, of honor, of pity—that is, some principle of sportsmanship in its largest sense.”⁴

Hemingway was a disciplined and self-critical writer, but he did not always please his readers or the critics. To some his range of subjects and his view of life seemed unfortunately narrow, and he was occasionally charged with being a prisoner of his own style. At his best, however, he was incomparable in reflecting the modern temper. He probably exerted a more profound influence on contemporary literature, for better or for worse, than any other American writer.

Of JOHN STEINBECK, one critic has said: “The two basic impulses of the 30’s, toward escape and toward social consciousness, found their sharpest expression in the writing of John Steinbeck, whose work represents more faithfully than any of his contemporaries the temperament of the angry decade.”⁵

Although some of Steinbeck’s writing might be described as escapist, the work that brought him distinction was *The Grapes of Wrath*, an immensely popular novel about the uprooted farmers who migrated from the Dust Bowl of Oklahoma to the overcrowded valleys of southern California. It was far superior to the many novels that depicted with literal but unconvincing realism the unhappy lives of the depression poor. This so-called “proletarian literature,” created in a mood of social protest, was usually inept and soon forgotten. However, Steinbeck’s novel not only told a memorable story well, it also asserted with power the dignity of the individual and the endurance of the “little people” of America, who would go on even under the most crushing circumstances. The novel won for Steinbeck the Pulitzer Prize in 1939.

Not only in method but also in style, WILLIAM FAULKNER seemed the opposite of Hemingway. Faulkner’s words tumbled over each other in great rhetorical floods. Though

⁴Wilson, *op. cit.*, p. 220.

⁵Leo Gurko, *The Angry Decade* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1947), p. 201.

6 ☞ *Three Distinguished Moderns*

sometimes difficult to follow, his style conjured up rich images, bitter memories, and high emotions in an effect quite different from Hemingway's understatement. Faulkner's total literary output was also uneven—he frankly turned out some sensational potboilers⁶—but his stature as an artist was firmly established by the time of his death. He was recognized as not only the most brilliant writer in the modern literary renaissance of the South, but also a rare creative genius who might possibly be the greatest American writer of the first half of the twentieth century.

⁶*potboilers*: works of art or literature, often inferior, produced only to make money

Ernest Hemingway

In several short stories, as well as in his novel *A Farewell to Arms*, Ernest Hemingway wrote about a young American serving in the Italian army during World War I. Hemingway himself had fought in the Italian infantry, and had been wounded in battle two weeks before his nineteenth birthday. The following story about a young soldier is Hemingway's unique way of expressing a theme that has been present throughout American fiction: man's sense of being painfully isolated and apart from the world around him. This theme surprisingly links Hemingway with writers very different from himself—most notably, Nathaniel Hawthorne.

In Another Country

In the fall the war was always there, but we did not go to it any more. It was cold in the fall in Milan and the dark came very early. Then the electric lights came on, and it was pleasant along the streets looking in the windows. There was much game hanging outside the shops, and the snow powdered in the fur of the foxes and the wind blew their tails. The deer hung stiff and heavy and empty, and small birds blew in the wind and the wind turned their feathers. It was a cold fall and the wind came down from the mountains.

We were all at the hospital every afternoon, and there were different ways of walking across the town through the dusk to the hospital. Two of the ways were alongside canals, but they were long. Always, though, you crossed a bridge across a canal to enter the hospital. There was a choice of three bridges. On one of them a woman sold roasted chestnuts. It was warm, standing in front of her charcoal fire, and the chestnuts were warm afterward in your pocket. The hospital was very old and very beautiful, and you entered through a gate

and walked across a courtyard and out a gate on the other side. There were usually funerals starting from the courtyard. Beyond the old hospital were the new brick pavilions, and there we met every afternoon and were all very polite and interested in what was the matter, and sat in the machines that were to make so much difference.

The doctor came up to the machine where I was sitting and said: "What did you like best to do before the war? Did you practice a sport?"

I said: "Yes, football."

"Good," he said. "You will be able to play football again better than ever."

My knee did not bend and the leg dropped straight from the knee to the ankle without a calf, and the machine was to bend the knee and make it move as in riding a tricycle. But it did not bend yet, and instead the machine lurched when it came to the bending part. The doctor said: "That will all pass. You are a fortunate young man. You will play football again like a champion."

In the next machine was a major who had a little hand like a baby's. He winked at me when the doctor examined his hand, which was between two leather straps that bounced up and down and flapped the stiff fingers, and said: "And will I too play football, captain-doctor?" He had been a very great fencer, and before the war the greatest fencer in Italy.

The doctor went to his office in the back room and brought a photograph which showed a hand that had been withered almost as small as the major's, before it had taken a machine course, and after was a little larger. The major held the photograph with his good hand and looked at it very carefully. "A wound?" he asked.

"An industrial accident," the doctor said.

"Very interesting, very interesting," the major said, and handed it back to the doctor.

"You have confidence?"

"No," said the major.

There were three boys who came each day who were about the same age I was. They were all three from Milan, and one of them was to be a lawyer, and one was to be a painter, and

one had intended to be a soldier, and after we were finished with the machines, sometimes we walked back together to the Café Cova, which was next door to the Scala.¹ We walked the short way through the communist quarter because we were four together. The people hated us because we were officers, and from a wine shop some one called out, "A basso gli ufficiali!"² as we passed. Another boy who walked with us sometimes and made us five wore a black silk handkerchief across his face because he had no nose then and his face was to be rebuilt. He had gone out to the front from the military academy and had been wounded within an hour after he had gone into the front line for the first time. They rebuilt his face, but he came from a very old family and they could never get the nose exactly right. He went to South America and worked in a bank. But this was a long time ago, and then we did not any of us know how it was going to be afterward. We only knew then that there was always the war, but that we were not going to it any more.

We all had the same medals, except the boy with the black silk bandage across his face, and he had not been at the front long enough to get any medals. The tall boy with a very pale face who was to be a lawyer had been a lieutenant of Arditi³ and had three medals of the sort we each had only one of. He had lived a very long time with death and was a little detached. We were all a little detached, and there was nothing that held us together except that we met every afternoon at the hospital. Although, as we walked to the Cova through the tough part of town, walking in the dark, with light and singing coming out of the wine shops, and sometimes having to walk into the street when the men and women would crowd together on the sidewalk so that we would have had to jostle them to get by, we felt held together by there being something that happened that they, the people who disliked us, did not understand.

We ourselves all understood the Cova, where it was rich and warm and not too brightly lighted, and noisy and smoky at

¹*La Scala*: famous opera house in Milan

²*A basso gli ufficiali*: "down with the officers" (Italian)

³*Arditi*: Italian infantry storm troops

certain hours, and there were always girls at the tables and the illustrated papers on a rack on the wall. The girls at the Cova were very patriotic, and I found that the most patriotic people in Italy were the café girls—and I believe they are still patriotic.

The boys at first were very polite about my medals and asked me what I had done to get them. I showed them the papers, which were written in very beautiful language and full of *fratellanza* and *abnegazione*,⁴ but which really said, with the adjectives removed, that I had been given the medals because I was an American. After that their manner changed a little toward me, although I was their friend against outsiders. I was a friend, but I was never really one of them after they had read the citations, because it had been different with them and they had done very different things to get their medals. I had been wounded, it was true; but we all knew that being wounded, after all, was really an accident. I was never ashamed of the ribbons, though, and sometimes, after the cocktail hour, I would imagine myself having done all the things they had done to get their medals; but walking home at night through the empty streets with the cold wind and all the shops closed, trying to keep near the street lights, I knew that I would never have done such things, and I was very much afraid to die, and often lay in bed at night by myself, afraid to die and wondering how I would be when I went back to the front again.

The three with the medals were like hunting hawks; and I was not a hawk, although I might seem a hawk to those who had never hunted; they, the three, knew better and so we drifted apart. But I stayed good friends with the boy who had been wounded his first day at the front, because he would never know now how he would have turned out; so he could never be accepted either, and I liked him because I thought perhaps he would not have turned out to be a hawk either.

The major, who had been the great fencer, did not believe in bravery, and spent much time while we sat in the machines correcting my grammar. He had complimented me on how I

⁴*fratellanza and abnegazione*: brotherhood and self-denial (Italian)