

ANTHOLOGY OF AMERICAN LITERATURE

SECOND EDITION

VOLUME II

Realism to the Present

Part 2



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Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc.

NEW YORK

Collier Macmillan Publishers

LONDON

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Printed in the United States of America

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Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc.
866 Third Avenue, New York, New York 10022
Collier Macmillan Canada, Ltd.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

McMichael, George L. (date) comp.
Anthology of American literature.

Includes bibliographies and indexes.

1. American literature. I. Title.

PS507.M24 1980 810'.8 79-15775

ISBN 0-02-379570-0 (v. 1)

ISBN 0-02-379580-8 (v. 2)

Printing: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

Year: 0 1 2 3 4 5 6



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20th-Century Literature

T

HE United States began the twentieth century with a population of less than 76,000,000, almost two thirds of it rural. The expansion of the railroads after the Civil War had reduced the provincial isolation of the nation—by 1900 the United States had 200,000 miles of railroad tracks, more than all of Europe—yet the dominant symbol of mobility and industrialism that was to transform America had only begun to appear: in all the land there were only 8,000 horseless carriages and a mere 150 miles of paved country roads.

Three quarters of a century later the population had almost tripled. The vast majority of Americans lived in large urban centers. They owned 120,000,000 automobiles that congested 3,000,000 miles of roads and streets; more of the American land was paved than remained in virgin wilderness. The nation's wealth and its technological achievements on earth and in space had astonished the world.

In 1900 the American arts were poised on the brink of a turbulent modernity. In little more than two decades American painters, architects, composers, poets, playwrights, and novelists would adopt a variety of avant-garde doctrines so revolutionary as to exhaust the traditional vocabulary of the arts and require the creation of completely new descriptive terms: futurism, expressionism, post-impressionism, dadaism, cubism, imagism, and surrealism.

The changes to come were clearly evident in the visual arts early in the century. The first exhibit of modern European art in the United States took place in 1908. Five years later a vast art show, held in a New York City armory, established a landmark in American cultural history by introducing large numbers of Americans to modern art for the first time. Of the 1600 works in the Armory Show, many departed radically from past tradition: urban slums and human derelicts were portrayed with harsh realism by American artists of what the newspapers derisively called the "Ash Can School;" paintings by European artists were filled with the swirling lines of *neo-impressionism* or with the geometric fragments and shifting viewpoints of the new cubism that seemed to defy all logic. Such "artistic anarchy" stunned the public, creating an enormous *succès de scandale*. Bewildered critics scoffed at the show's "freak art;" students hanged offending artists in effigy. Former President Theodore Roosevelt dismissed the radical paintings and sculpture as work of "the lunatic fringe." But the Armory Show of 1913 signaled the rise of artistic ideals that would dominate American art throughout the twentieth century.