

BEYOND CONCEPT

超越概念——高等院校英语专业系列教材


总主编 ◎ 何其莘 [美] 杨孝明



**A HISTORY OF
AMERICAN
LITERATURE**

美国文学史 (下)

主 编 ◎ 陈世丹 屈晓丽

 中国人民大学出版社

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AMERICAN LITERATURE IN THE MODERN PERIOD

(1900—1945)

Historical Introduction

The modern period in American literature refers to the period between the two World Wars, WWI (1914—1918) and WWII (1939—1945). It was a period that witnessed economical boom and recession and a period that underwent great social changes. It was a period of spiritual crisis, a time of turmoil and a time characterized by artistic experimentation and a time of literary prosperity. It was a period when America established its leadership in world politics, military as well as literature. In short, it was a period of great importance with lasting influence.

The First World War (1914—1918) The First World War, also called the “Great War,” broke out in 1914. It was fought between the Entente Countries/Allies: Britain, France, Italy, and Tsarist Russia, and the Allied Nations: Germany and Austro-Hungary. America did not enter the war until the day when the US Congress formally declared war on Germany. It was April 6, 1917. While the war thrust Europe into a world of killing, blood, death, and chaos, it served as an important stimulating factor to American economic development. Between 1914 and 1916, the American industrial production increased gradually. By the end of the war, the United States had emerged as a new world leader with an expanding economy and the unmatched prosperity. In spite of that, with the ending of the war there was a prevailing new disillusionment, especially among writers. Americans were confident and optimistic when they initially participated in the war. But that cheerful mood was soon taken over by the brutality, savagery, cruelty, and horror of the war. Many Americans took to the battle field for the sake of patriotism, heroism, and the devotion to a

great cause, “saving” civilization. To their disappointment, the war didn’t change the world for the better. It caused heavy toll/loss of lives, and Europe was still plagued by turmoil and economic crisis which made the sacrifices meaningless. The victors, while made great sacrifices, also committed killing. The ending of the war brought with it a sense of failure and disillusionment. In America, the shift from patriotism to disillusionment was also intensified by the fact that the social problems existent before the war, such as racial discrimination, inequality between men and women, and so on, remained the same.

The Roaring Twenties (1919—1929) American economy suffered from an acute recession in 1920—1921, which is known as the post-World War I recession. But it soon recovered as soldiers returning from the battlefields re-entered the labor force and factories shifted back to produce consumer goods. The economy of the country successfully transitioned from a wartime economy to a peacetime economy. Mass production made it possible for the middle class to gain access to technological products like radios and cars. As the first mass broadcasting medium, radio enjoyed a “golden age,” together with movies and advertising, it played a very important role in giving rise to the mass culture. With the expansion of the automobile industry, cars, no longer a luxury as they used to be before the war, now mass-produced, became a commonplace throughout the country. Its popularity not only led to the development of such industries as highway building, motels, service stations, and so on, but also enhanced mobility, which in a way contributed to urbanization. The period from 1923 to 1929 was the “thriving” stage of American economy marked by the enormous economic growth, such as the rapid rise of auto, electric, architectural, and iron and steel industries, and widespread prosperity. Now the USA became one of the richest countries in the world, with its culture becoming consumer-orientated.

The 1920s was an age of affluence. It was also an age of swift social changes and a decade of deep cultural conflicts, a time full of disturbing noises. Industrialization and urbanization generated excitement but also shock and chaos. The rise of a consumer-oriented economy and of mass entertainment became impetus of and helped to bring about a “revolution in morals and manners.” The decade witnessed a huge conflict between the old and the new. Immigration, race, alcohol, evolution, gender politics, and sexual morality, etc. all became major cultural issues.

Prohibition Among the events that dramatically affected the American society was the issuing of Prohibition. On January 16, 1919, Prohibition was instituted with ratification of *The Eighteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution*. It was actually a major reform movement from the 1840s into the 1920s. The law prohibited the “...manufacture, sale, or transportation of intoxicating liquors within, the importation thereof into, or the exportation thereof from the United States...” On October 28, 1919, the American Congress passed the *Volstead Act* to enforce the law. But the law was not strictly implemented in most large cities. As a result, it led to an increase in organized crime, although alcohol consumption declined. Many became millionaires by bootlegging. During the “thriving” years of the 1920s, people were

partying everywhere and indulging in a life of dissipation.

After years of endeavor, women finally won the struggle for suffrage. *The Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution* passed in 1920 granted women the right to vote. The passage of the law was the major victory of the movement known as the First-wave Feminism Movement. The passage of the law also marked the end of this movement. The 1920s saw significant changes in the lives of women. The old mentality about the role of women was challenged and replaced by the new ideas that women could pursue both a career and a family successfully. Women began to receive higher education. Women, especially, young women, took part in a sexual liberation of their generation. Ideas like equality and free sexuality were very popular. These young, rebellious, middle-class women, labeled “flappers” by older generations, did a breaking-off from the rigid Victorian way of life. Unlike the older generation, these “new women” were less interested in politics but they were more concerned about personal fulfillment. They wore short dresses, raccoon coats, had short hair, a chin-length bob. They smoked and drank in public, celebrated the sexual revolution, and embraced consumer culture. Opposing to these new ideas and changes, the notion of the “feminine mystique” was produced, which re-stressed the women’s role as housewives, causing frustration and dissatisfaction among many well-educated women.

In the 1920s, the American government tightened its law on immigration. Racial discrimination still existed. The Ku Klux Klan executed persecution on the blacks. The “Red Hunt” after the war, the Prohibition led to the contempt on and the widespread violation of law. Despite the soaring of economy, there was a prevailing mood of discontentment with the society. The justice of the war was questioned. The war did nothing to the world’s problems. Serious social problems such as racial and gender discrimination existent before the war remained unsolved. Disillusion with the war prevailed. Darwin’s theory of evolution and Nietzsche’s statement that “God is dead” broke the myth of God. God was no longer the center of the universe. Men were left alone helplessly at the mercy of natural forces, obsessed by the loss of faith and the sense of dislocation. The development of modern science on the one hand enriched and facilitated human life, but on the other hand, it impelled men to be skeptical about everything, generating a strong sense that life was fragmented and chaotic and hence meaningless and futile. Industrialization and mass production intensified this feeling. The sense of spiritual disorientation and nihilism became the mood of the time. In summary, the 1920s was a period in which the economic boom was accompanied by the pursuit of pleasure and material comfort and simultaneously the prevailing pessimism.

The Jazz Age The 1920s is also nicknamed the Jazz Age. Jazz was introduced into the mainstream of American culture and became the most popular form of music for young people, but to older generations, it was immoral and threatening to old cultural values. Jazz played a significant part in promoting cultural changes during the period, and had a lasting influence

on pop culture. Jazz was originally played by black Americans. It has a strong beat, with the characteristic of improvising, full of changes, free of control and spontaneous. It expresses an open, free, casual, and even bold and wild mood. It was seen to well represent the rebellious spirit of the time. The desire to break with the old tradition, to welcome changes, to follow the vogue of the day found its expression in the music. Hence the name, it was called the Jazz Age.

The Great Depression of the 1930s The “frenetic,” “glittering,” and “feverish” time was brought to an end by the sudden collapse of stock prices on Wall Street. The Wall Street crash occurred on October 29, 1929, also known as Black Tuesday, throwing America into what is later called the Great Depression, which also added to a worldwide depression throughout the 1930s. During this time, the American economy was stuck in severe recession. By the winter of 1932—1933, the country was caught in the deepest crisis since the Civil War, with women, the urban poor and all people of color suffering the most. People began to doubt and question the social system and the nation’s way of life. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt issued the New Deal as anti-crises measures. The New Deal took effect and helped the country out of crisis.

The economic crisis between 1929 and 1933 intensified the contradictions already existent in the capitalist system and led to wars in the imperialist countries, which finally triggered the outbreak of the Second World War on a full scale. In America, after the economic crisis, the American monopoly capital was further concentrated. In 1941, the US entered the war. The Second World War greatly stimulated the American industrial production. By the time the war ended in 1945, the whole productive forces of the country had increased by 40 per cent compared with 1939.



The Development of Literature

The Influence of New Theories and New Ideas From the mid-19th to the early 20th centuries, the developments in natural sciences and the social sciences, and innovations in industry as well as in the field of art in Europe functioned as impetus for the rise of modernism in the United States. Darwinism and Marxism still influenced the writers, artists, and intellectuals of this period. Besides, German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (1788—1860), French philosopher of positivism Hippolyte Adolphe Taine (1828—1893), and German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844—1900) also exerted influence on the writers, artists, and intellectuals of this time. But more direct and more important influence came from French philosopher Henri Bergson (1859—1941) and French existentialism. Bergson put forward the theories of intuitionism and psychological time, viewing the interior “duration” and “*élan vital*” as the real

existence, which could be perceived through intuition rather than experience. Existentialism held a negative view on life, believing that man's life is full of suffering, loneliness, and pain. These philosophies became the sources of the post-war pessimism, skepticism, nihilism, and anarchism. The keynote of literary writing in this period is "tragic sense of life." The development of psychology also contributed to the birth of modernism. Austrian neurologist Sigmund Freud (1856—1939) developed what was known as psychoanalysis, which put great importance on the unconscious or the irrational in the human psyche. Freud's interpretation of dreams was another influence on the development of modernism. In addition, American psychologist, William James' theory of "stream of consciousness," and Swiss psychiatrist, Carl Jung's theory "collective unconscious" and "archetypal symbol" were also contributing factors. Their theories, plus that of Freud, prompted the modernist writers to shift their attention from the external world to the inner world and to probe into the inner world of human reality.

The Historical and Socio-Cultural Background The First World War (1914—1918) serves as a dividing line between the 19th-century American literature and the modern American literature. The war and its aftermath had enormous impact on the postwar America. The war consumed countless property, took millions of lives, and traumatized the survivals. War means violence, devastation, blood and death, helpless in solving the existent problems, instead, leaving the world fragmented and chaotic. Traditional ideas and values and the "American dream" collapsed. After a short-time economic boom, a severe economic crisis broke out. The whole country was stuck in the ten-year depression. The world was disintegrated and turbulent, with a sense of unease and restlessness underneath, and spiritual and moral decline, which resulted in the feelings of fear, loss, disorientation, and disillusionment. New ideas and new approaches and techniques were needed to define and present the postwar life and the society. It was under these circumstances that modernism emerged.

The Impact of European Avant-Garde Art Prior to WWI, the modernist movement, labeled as the avant-garde movement, in painting, photography, sculpture, music, and so on exerted a great impact on American literature, catalytic to its reform and innovation. This influence was evident in the works of American modernist writers. For example, in 1909, Gertrude Stein (1874—1946), by then an expatriate in Paris, published her innovative fiction *Three Lives* (1909), which was a result of the influence of cubism, jazz, and other contemporary movements in art and music. In painting, both the French impressionist and the German expressionist artists tended to represent the human reality from subjective perspective, offering a highly personal vision of the world. This approach was employed in literature as a revolt against realism and naturalism, with the attempt to depict psychological or spiritual reality instead of reflecting external reality. The employment of impressionism and expressionism was apparent in the works of F. Scott Fitzgerald, William Faulkner, Eugene O'Neill, etc. Eugene O'Neill's plays like *Emperor Jones* (1920), *The Hairy Ape* (1922), etc. are typical plays written in the mode of

expressionism. In America, cubism, a popular school of modern painting in the early 20th century also found its way into the works of American writers of the modern period. It emphasized the formal structure of a work of art and the multiple-perspective viewpoints, which gave the American writers the idea to depict the reality from multiple perspectives.

The Lost Generation The catastrophes of the war and traumatic experience it brought to people shattered people's belief in the former ideals and values and gave them a strong feeling of uncertainty and disillusionment. There was a prevailing new disillusionment, especially among writers. They rebelled against former ideals and values, but replaced them only by despair or a cynical hedonism. Disillusioned and disgusted by the frivolous, greedy, and heedless way of life in America, many writers and poets left America for European countries, esp. Paris France. They formed a community of writers and artists there experimenting with new modes of writing with other European counterparts. These "expatriates" who lived in Paris in the 1920s and 1930s were called the "Lost Generation," a label given by Gertrude Stein. Included in this group were distinguished artists such as T. S. Eliot (1888—1965), F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896—1940), Ernest Hemingway (1899—1961), and John Dos Passos (1896—1970). Writers of this group were disillusioned with former ideals and values and even with the so-called civilization of the capitalist society. In literary creation, they sought to break with the traditional and the obsolete and experiment with new approaches and techniques to capture the essence of the postwar life. In addition, many of them had war experiences and they used them as the basis for their writings.

The Waste Land Image American literature of the 1920s was characterized by a prevailing disillusionment, pessimism, and nihilism. T. S. Eliot's poem "The Waste Land" (1922) presents a picture of the sterility and chaos of the postwar western world, the decline of western culture and expresses the despair and depression of the postwar era. This waste land image is recurrent in the works of Eliot's contemporaries. F. Scott Fitzgerald, the representative of the Jazz Age, portrays a spiritual waste land of the age in his books. The theme of disillusionment and spiritual decadence is expressed poignantly in his novel *The Great Gatsby* (1925). Beneath the restlessness, pleasure seeking, there was only meaninglessness and emptiness, a kind of spiritual and moral deterioration and the collapse of ideals. As the spokesman of the Lost Generation, Ernest Hemingway gives a portrait of the expatriate group, the Lost Generation with his novel *The Sun Also Rises* (1926). His novels convey the sense of loss and despair among the postwar generation both physically and psychologically. William Faulkner illustrates the modern society as a wasteland through his own fictional world, the Yoknapatawpha County, which is not only the mirror of the decline of the southern society but also the spiritual decadence of the modern American society devoid of essential human values.

Literary Achievements in the 1920s The decade of the 1920s witnessed a flowering of literature so that it can be termed the second renaissance in the history of American literature. Heavyweight writers in great number emerged, many of whom gained international recognition

and helped to promote the popularity of American literature in the world. In 1920, Sinclair Lewis published *Main Street* and in 1922, *Babbitt*. The year 1922 saw the appearance of a monumental modernist innovative work of art, T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land." In 1925, Theodore Dreiser's masterpiece of naturalism, *An American Tragedy* came out. In 1926, F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby* caught the attention of the public. In 1926, Ernest Hemingway brought out his novel *The Sun Also Rises*. The 1929 was signaled by two important modern novels, *A Farewell to Arms* by Hemingway and *The Sound and the Fury* by William Faulkner. American playwright, Eugene O'Neill, published three important plays successively in 1920, 1921, and 1922. These plays, *The Emperor Jones* (1920), *Anna Christie* (1921), and *The Hairy Ape* (1922), established him as an international playwright. Of the writers of this decade, Sinclair Lewis, T. S. Eliot, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, and Eugene O'Neill were winners of the Nobel Prize in literature.

The literary thrive of this decade was also indebted to some other important writers who wrote and published their works then. Sherwood Anderson (1876—1941) published *Poor White* (1920) and *The Triumph of the Egg* (1921). Willa Cather (1873—1947), who continued to write in the realistic tradition, published *Professor's House* (1925) and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927). Thomas Wolfe (1900—1938) published his first book *Looking Homeward, Angel* (1929).

Literary Development in the 1930s America of the Depression era was shrouded in a prevailing despair and panic. The economic crisis and the rise of fascism in Europe set the keynote for American literature during this period. Writers were greatly concerned with social problems and the living conditions of the lower class. Literature at this time was characterized by its blunt and direct social criticism. The "social conscience" novels became prosperous again. The then proletarian writers, Marxists and their follow travelers, exposed and criticized the capitalist system, the cause of the Depression, and also spread their revolutionary ideas by means of fiction. Among them were John Dos Passos and John Steinbeck (1902—1968). John Dos Passos was best known for his *USA* trilogy composed of *The 42nd Parallel* (1930), *1919* (1932), and *The Big Money* (1936). The trilogy is a record of the history of America beginning with the Gilded Age through the First World War to the booming twenties. It shows how America as an industrial giant dominates and depersonalizes the individuals. John Steinbeck was preoccupied with the poor, working-class people and wrote about their struggle for a decent and honest life. His masterpiece *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), a "social conscience" novel tells the story of the Joads, a poor family from Oklahoma. In search of a better life, the family embarked on a journey to California, which turned out to be a journey accompanied by pain, suffering, and death. With their journey, the author presents a landscape of decay and desolation. The author also expresses his sympathy with the poor and wretched and more importantly his belief in humanity and the future, and that's where he is different from other writers of his time. Another popular novel of his published in the same decade was *Of Mice and Men* (1937). He was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature in 1962.

The Second American Literary Renaissance The 1920s and the 1930s were considered

as the second American literary renaissance due to the emergence of the large number of great writers and the enormous quantities of books they created and the huge influence both national and international they produced, which enhanced American literature to a new height.

The Southern Renaissance The 1920s and 1930s also witnessed the revival of American southern culture and literature known as the Southern Renaissance. It is considered as the most striking literary development of the thirties. Important writers in this period included William Faulkner, Caroline Gordon, Elizabeth Madox Roberts, Katherine Anne Porter, Allen Tate, Tennessee Williams, Robert Penn Warren, and others, among whom William Faulkner was the most influential and famous. Different from the writers before the Southern Renaissance, writers in this period tended to deal with such major themes as the burden of history, the southern history being a history burden with slavery and military defeat, the existence of individuals in the conservative culture of the South where one's personal value was not important as compared to those of family, religion, community, and racial issues. Writers also experimented with modernistic techniques, such as stream of consciousness and complex narrative techniques in their artistic activity. The southern literature shares some distinctive features of modern literature. For example, it also expressed the sense of dislocation and alienation. It was central to the southern writing in the 1930s, which stemmed partly from the South's ambivalence about America's advance toward secularism, progress, prosperity, and power. The predicament, the desire to honor its past and the desire to desert it, led to a tension involved in the southern fiction of the 1930s. It dealt with the issues of class, caste, race, and gender, and produced "stories about being other." Faulkner gave voices to the poor, female, and the black. His fiction bears features of modern fiction, pessimistic, violent, brutal, and despairing. Welty wrote in the formalist tradition common with world modernism. Other southern writers of this time include Thomas Wolfe and Anne Porter.

The Harlem Renaissance In addition, the 1920s and the 1930s saw the thrive of Afro-American literature—The Harlem Renaissance. The Harlem Renaissance was a cultural movement between the 1920s and 1930s. At the time, it was known as the "New Negro Movement." The concept of "New Negro" was first introduced in the 19th century and became popular during the Harlem Renaissance. The term stressed African American assertiveness and self-confidence during the years following World War I and the Great Migration, achieving a new image of pride and dignity, a striving after "spiritual emancipation," as a contrast to the "Old Negro." Its headquarter was in northern Manhattan, Harlem, where gathered African American writers, mostly newcomers from the South. The publication of Countee Cullen's "I Have a Rendezvous with Life (with apologies to Alan Seeger)" and Langston Hughes' poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" in 1921 marked the beginning of the movement. The peak of this "flowering of Negro literature" was between 1924 and 1929. The movement dated back to the late 1910s. The Harlem Renaissance was a burst of creative activity by African American writers and artists. African-American literature

and art developed rapidly during this period. There emerged many important African American writers including Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, Zora Neale Hurston, and others, most of whom moved to Harlem during the renaissance. Through literature and art, they expressed their racial pride, challenged the pervading racism and stereotypes against the blacks, and promoted progressive politics, and racial and social integration and equality. The art that emerged in this period involved a wide variety of cultural elements and styles. The renaissance was more than a literary or artistic movement and it did a lot in promoting social development through proclaiming a new racial consciousness and advocating racial integration. It made it clear that the black experience was part of American cultural history in terms of culture and sociology. It redefined how America, and the world, viewed the African-American population. It encouraged the new appreciation of folk roots and culture. It contributed a lot to the rise of jazz. But in its attempt to create a new culture and art, the Harlem Renaissance could not sufficiently be immune to white, European culture. African American writers and artists were consciously or unconsciously drawn to the social norms and values created by the whites. The Harlem Renaissance continued throughout the 1920s and into the 1930s. It ended abruptly due to the Great Depression.

High Modernism American literary modernist movement experienced three phases: early modernism, high modernism, and late modernism. The modernist movement between the end of the First World War and the beginning of the Second is referred to as high modernism. The term is specially used to describe literary modernism of this time. American modernist writers of this time include Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway and others. The American modernist movement reflected American life in the 20th century. The prevailing sense of disillusionment found its way into American literary works, which were becoming more and more cynical and more tended to explore the darker aspects of human nature. Artistically, American modernists abandoned traditional literary modes, doubting if they were adequate in depicting the harsh realities of the time. They experimented with all kinds of new approaches and techniques to capture the essence of modern life. They broke up the narrative continuity and coherence by omitting the transitions, expositions, explanations, and resolutions common in traditional literature so that their works were full of fragments which were well suited for presenting a picture of the modern world, a world that was fragmented. Instead of directly stating their themes, they endeavored to have them implied so as to create a sense of uncertainty, the kind of sense the modern world evoked. The works of American modernist writers covered a wide variety of themes concerning race relations, gender roles, sexuality, and so on. Affected by the trauma of the First World War or disillusioned with their war experience, many American modernist writers explored the psychological and spiritual wounds caused by the war. The economic crisis in America at the beginning of the 1930s was also the theme of their works. Another theme is the loss of self and need for self-definition.



Modernism

Modernism is a general term used to describe the widespread movement or a trend of thought concerning art, literature, architecture, music, and so on, which took place around 1850 and lasted for about a century. In a narrow sense, this term is specially used to refer to the modernist movement in literature and the other arts in the early decades of the twentieth century, especially after World War I (1914—1918). Modernism is characterized by its revolt against some of the traditional bases constituting the western society, culture, religion, and art. Modernists deliberately and radically sought to break with conventional notions and the established norms and experimented with new and even “shocking” modes and means of expression to reflect the reality of their time. The spiritual sources of modernism are from the thinkers who had questioned the plausibility of the traditional social systems, religion, morality as well as the traditional conception about human self. The catalytic factors of modernism include the development of natural sciences and social sciences, industrialization and urbanization, rapid social changes and the outbreak of WW I and its aftermaths, as well.

The origins of this movement can be traced back to the early 19th century. Two ideas originating in France had particular impact on modernist movement. The first was impressionism, a school of painting. The second was symbolism, whose beginning was marked by *Fleur du mal*, (1857), a poem by the French poet Charles Baudelaire (1861—1867). There were two thinkers who exerted major influences on the development of modernism in this period. They were biologist Charles Darwin (1809—1882), author of *On Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (1859), and political scientist Karl Marx (1818—1883). From the late 19th to the early 20th centuries, the influential intellectuals and thinkers were Sigmund Freud (1856—1939), Carl Jung (1875—1961), Friedrich Nietzsche, and Henri Bergson (1859—1941). Important literary precursors of modernism at this time included Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821—1881), Walt Whitman (1819—1892), and others. From 1910—1930, the development of modernism entered a new phrase. Pablo Picasso shocked the world with his radical painting practice. In 1907, the first expressionist play came out. In 1909, futurism came into being. The year 1911 saw the first abstract painting. In 1913, Ezra Pound founded imagism. Modernism in this period assumed new characteristics. It preferred discontinuity to smooth change. It favored disruption, rejecting simple realism. All this showed that modernists were more radical, seeking to overthrow traditional norms and traditional social structure, as they were hindering progress. Two events, the First World War (1914—1918) and the Russian Revolution of 1917, further pushed modernism forward. Modernism which used to be a minority pursuit before the war came to permeate into

the public life. It appeared in various forms and in various fields. For example, in painting, it appeared as Dada and in literature, it appeared as surrealism. Each of them sought to break with the traditional and the obsolete and experiment with new approaches and techniques, just as the poet Ezra Pound appealed to “Make it new” in 1934. The modernist movement between the end of the First World War and the beginning of the Second is referred to as high modernism. The term is specially used to describe literary modernism of this time. Modernist writers of this time include Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, Yeats, Joyce, and others. By 1930, modernism had become part of the mainstream, either politically and artistically and had entered popular culture.

The core of modernism is its self-conscious break with tradition and desire for innovation. Many modernists believed that tradition should be abandoned so that new modes of artistic creation could be found. They stressed the freedom of expression, experimentation, the use of radically new and even primitive means. In literature this often meant the rejection of plots or characterization easy to understand in novels, or the defying of clear interpretation in composing poetry. Literary modernists were keen on disjunctive narratives, surreal images, and incoherence.

American literary modernist movement experienced three phases: early modernism, high modernism, and late modernism. In America, modernism as a literary movement reached its peak in the 1920s and ended by 1939. The American modernist movement reflected American life in the 20th century. In a quickly industrializing world, the pace of life was hastened, social norms, boundaries and structure were all being challenged and were dissolving and the individual was left alone, wandering, purposeless, with no identity. Loss of identity led to a feeling of isolation and alienation. In addition, the catastrophe of the First World War shook faith in western civilization and idealism about the country. The world was falling apart and violence, vagueness, and spiritual emptiness were all what were left. The Great Depression at the end of the 1920s and during the 1930s intensified the sense of disillusionment and crashed the optimism about the economic prosperity and stability of the country.

This prevailing sense of disillusionment found its way into American literary works, which were becoming more and more cynical and more tended to explore the darker aspects of human nature. Artistically, American modernists abandoned traditional literary modes, doubting if they were adequate in depicting the harsh realities of the time. They experimented with all kinds of new approaches and techniques to capture the essence of modern life. They broke up the narrative continuity and coherence by omitting the transitions, expositions, explanations, and resolutions common in traditional literature so that their works were full of fragments which well suited/reflected/vividly presented a picture of the modern world, a world that was fragmented. Instead of directly stating their themes, they endeavored to have them implied so as to create a sense of uncertainty, the kind of sense the modern world evoked. In this aspect, two American modernist writers are worth special mentioning. They are T. S. Eliot (1888—1965) and Gertrude Stein. T. S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land” (1922) is considered to be a monument of modernist