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THE DEPRESSION ERA

A Historical Exploration of Literature

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HISTORICAL EXPLORATIONS OF LITERATURE

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Introduction to the Depression Era

It was March 1945, during the waning days of the global conflagration (World War II) that had finally moved the United States beyond the recent Great Depression. One of America's finest playwrights, Tennessee Williams, was hearing some of his words spoken before a paying audience for the first time during a performance of *The Glass Menagerie*:

> Yes, I have tricks in my pocket, I have things up my sleeve. But I am the opposite of a stage magician. He gives you illusion that has the appearance of truth. I give you truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion.
>
> To begin with, I turn bark time. I reverse it to that quaint period, the thirties, when the huge middle class of America was matriculating in a school for the blind. Their eyes had failed them or they had failed their eyes, and so they were having their fingers pressed forcibly down on the fiery Braille alphabet of a dissolving economy. (1945, 4–5)

Character Tom Wingfield, author Tennessee Williams's narrator and stand-in, was opening the play. The audience that night in Broadway's Playhouse Theater could well remember the appalling era that Wingfield refers to, the one that had been ended by war. Few alive today can remember it at all.

That older era, the "long" 1930s (stretching from the start of the stock market crash on October 24, 1929, to the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941), certainly had been a time of widespread suffering. It was unlike anything Americans had ever so widely experienced. Though war had now changed the economy, it could not remove the memory of the pain of privation or the truths Americans had been forced to learn through the Great Depression.

Williams tells us, through his alter ego Wingfield, that all writers have tricks—and that they all try to present truth through story. However, they do not always do this in "the pleasant disguise of illusion." In fact, the three writers around whose selected work this book is built, William Faulkner, John Steinbeck, and Richard Wright, tried to strip away illusion. All three attempted to present truths about the America they knew during that fourth decade of the 20th century, truths that have since been, often, forgotten—for we live in times far removed from the agonies of the 1930s. They were, we learn, all trying to strip away illusion even as they were creating it. This book is an attempt to retrieve some of the truths they tried to present for a generation with no direct memory of the Depression Era in which they wrote and which colored their prose and their stories.

As Wingfield correctly points out, the Great Depression had receded into distant memory even just four years after its end. Yet, today, the recent Great Recession along with continuing racial strife, among other aspects of the contemporary world, continue to conjure ancient cultural memories even in those born many decades after the Great Depression. Therefore, we should all learn to appreciate both the truths and the tricks of artists of that past; they retain for us important and influential memories.

After all, as Faulkner himself wrote in *Requiem for a Nun*, "The past is never dead. It's not even past" (1951, 73).

Like Wingfield's, my attempt here is to turn back time to that very decade presented in Williams's play, to bring to life for 21st-century readers a little of the trauma and rare triumph of the Great Depression in the United States. After all, it is through understanding of the culture and issues of that time that the books by the three subject writers can be best understood, the context of their writing and of the first readings coming to light through the windows of their cultural experience.

Here, you will find something other than standard essays about the four featured novels, something different, actually, from that generally contained in even the "literary biographies" popular at the time of their publication, an old-fashioned style of criticism even then coming to be sneered at by those contemporary scholars of the thirties who would soon come to

be called "New Critics." Instead, this book provides introductory snippets and slightly longer pieces of writings primarily from the Depression Era itself, extracts that, together, provide a broad mosaic pertinent to the intentions apparent in the texts of the four central novels of this book, Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* and *The Grapes of Wrath* and Wright's *Native Son*. As with any mosaic, the individual pieces may seem to mean little when looked at closely and individually; when seen from a little farther back, however, the patterns we seek begin to emerge.

It is patterns that dominate this book, patterns (we discover) dictated by the Depression Era itself and, not surprisingly, by these four novels from that time. These, however, are not the only patterns that can be found here. One of the joys of studying literature in the manner used here, which is part of what is generally and broadly called a "cultural studies" approach, is that, as in a kaleidoscope, each pattern is made up of parts that can be rearranged to create other patterns, some of which will never resolve into sensible designs but some of which will.

This book serves two purposes. First, it provides examples of how nonfiction texts can illuminate fiction. Second, the snippets that are used point toward the fuller texts they come from—and toward others—which can, when explored, provide fresh insight into the works of fiction under consideration and into even more, the cultural history of a formative era of American history. Together, these excerpts can assist readers in appreciating that time and the four central novels with a fullness not otherwise easily achieved.

This is not simply a source book, then, but both an introduction to potential sources and a portrait of an era through, primarily, its own words.

BACKGROUNDS

To get started on this exploration of the Depression Era, we need to highlight a few of the assumptions providing grounding here for the explorations that will follow, establishing a base to stand on as we try to make sense of the literature of the time as exemplified in the four novels we're hoping to amplify. Doing so, after all, is our primary purpose here. The examination of these assumptions has three parts. The first concerns the theoretical frame of literature and art of the Great Depression. The second is derived from our own contemporary frame of reference, from the way we look at literature, from what we expect from it and from what we are willing to give it. The third is a necessary historical frame made up of the descriptions of the decade in this introduction, the following chronology of the Depression Era, and also through the chapters that follow.

Theoretical Frame

The poet John Crowe Ransom's influence was not just on his fellow Southern poets at Vanderbilt University in the 1930s—he was also a prominent literary critic. His book *The New Criticism*, published in 1941, gave a name to the style of criticism that was gathering steam during the Depression, a school of thought that not only flavored both the works of the time but that dominated literary criticism for most of the rest of the 20th century. Though, in many ways, it was quite new, it also stems, in its distant ancestry, from Calvinist visions of how the Bible should be read, that is, as both primary text and as its own exegesis (see Lynn Hinojosa's 2015 work, *Puritanism and Modernist Novels*, for more information), but it also arises from more recent attempts to develop more rigorous frameworks for the study of literature.

Four years before his book appeared, Ransom's article "Criticism, Inc." in the autumn 1937 issue of *Virginia Quarterly Review* outlined the rationale for the change in focus for literary criticism that would become the New Criticism. He wrote that "the students of the future must be permitted to study literature, and not merely about literature. But I think this is what the good students have always wanted to do" (Ransom, 1937). Though, since that time, we have moved beyond many New Critical concepts, this one remains central to all study of literature and should be the core motivation for students. Following that line of thought, the material in this book does not replace the reading of the four novels at its heart; instead, it is intended to expand reader knowledge, making reading more enjoyable, understandable, and productive.

But what *was* literary criticism to Ransom and to students, scholars, and general readers during the Depression Era? In his article, after excluding "historical scholarship" and "Neo-Humanism," Ransom begins his answer by listing six further items he believes criticism is *not*:

1. Personal reactions;
2. Synopsis/paraphrase;
3. Historical studies;
4. Linguistic studies;
5. Moral studies; and
6. Anything coming *out* of the work.

Ransom saw "historical scholarship" as mainly (not surprisingly) historical and linguistic and only a small percentage of it as critical or aesthetic, so he rejects it. Neo-Humanism, which he also refers to as New Humanism, stems from the British scholar and poet Matthew Arnold by way of American Irving Babbitt's 1908 book *Literature and the American College*. A moral aesthetic stance, the New Humanism focuses on the unique nature of human beings, that their essence hinges on moral and ethical decisions, and that the human will is free. To Ransom, this brings too much *to* the work, burying it under the weight of reader belief.

Out of the way the Bible had come to be studied through the Protestant Reformation and out the work of Ransom and others (particularly I.A. Richards and William Empson) soon came a convention for literary study now called "close reading," the analysis of a text through minute examination of its words and their relationships and the structures they "create" as the reader moves through them. By the 1950s, this had become a standard tool of the literary scholar and it has remained so since, though the criticism toolbox has expanded to include much more, including "distant reading" which argues that much can also be learned by viewing texts in aggregates. "Distant reading" is promoted most prominently today by the scholar Franco Moretti. His book *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for Literary History* (2007) is a guide to the technique. It, too, is a removal of the personal experience from literary criticism, however, providing another way of keeping to a more impersonal mode of study.

Though many literary critics understood why Ransom wanted to remove personal reactions from criticism (they are subjective and personal and often cannot stand up to impartial scrutiny), this limitation made a few of them uncomfortable. The beating heart of literature is the grappling between reader and text, an extremely individual task and not one that always leads to universal conclusions. Today, many of us see avoidance of this subjectivity as a weakness of New Criticism.

Every contemporary critic and scholar, however, will agree with Ransom's second point: Synopsis is not scholarship. It is for this reason that you will not find traditional synopses of our four novels here. Yes, sometimes it *is* worth having a quick guide to the structure and events in a work of narrative art, even though, by itself, in no way does this contribute to increased understanding of the work. The introductory synopses to each book you will find here are, therefore, something more than simply plot reviews though they still do serve the purpose of helping readers better navigate the books.

While many literary scholars, like some biblical scholars, once contended that historical studies deflect from the main subject of study, the text itself, others now feel that excluding the history surrounding composition weakens potential for understanding. Coming from the work of

Stephen Greenblatt, a school of literary theorists called "New Historicism" has grown, claiming that no work can be fully understood without recognition of the web of human interaction around it. This present book is influenced by New Historical thinking.

Little presented here pertains to the linguistic study of literature, though this is a field growing in influence in conjunction with both "distant reading" and the new field of "digital humanities." Linguists are taking heart from DNA studies; what they have long seen as their potential contribution to literature is being confirmed through what is being found in the sciences. That is, the things that make up words may be able to tell us as much about language arts as genetic data now does about humans.

The attempt to keep a moral element out of literary studies seems quaint in a milieu heavily influenced by Postmodernism and irony, for irony itself always has a moral element and demands one from its readers. Postmodernism also posits that objectivity is itself a fiction and argues that even the claim to it is a moral stance.

Just as anything going *into* the text is fair game for the literary scholar today, so is everything coming *out* of the work. Texts are seen as cultural documents, part of the dynamic of influence and the progression of history.

Though the prescriptive nature of Ransom's vision has disappeared, the influence of the New Critics remains. "Critical inquiries," wrote W.K. Wimsatt Jr. and M.C. Beardsley just after the end of World War II but reflecting attitudes that had been developing a decade earlier, "are not settled by consulting the oracle." The "oracle" is the author. Their article, in Volume 54, Issue 3 of *The Sewanee Review* (Jul.–Sep., 1946), is entitled "The Intentional Fallacy." They argue that the student, the scholar, and the critic should best ignore the author of any work of art, focusing instead on the text, the thing in itself. Their attitude illuminates one of the essences of the New Criticism and its impact continues, though New Criticism no longer dominates literary studies.

Today, we neither ignore nor worship the "oracle," though we recognize that authorial intent, design, and execution are important aspects of any work of art. Instead, we ask everyone: What's the point of writing? Of reading? William Faulkner would probably answer differently than would John Steinbeck and Richard Wright—at least superficially. The latter pair would make no claim to be other than writers with overt political agendas that drove, at least in part, their literary efforts. Faulkner would likely reject any notion of his own adherence to such ends. He wrote because he was a writer; that's what he *did*. His was something of a "modernist" sensibility reflecting the most cutting-edge thinking about art of his time—and

reflecting the thinking of the New Critics. He tried to break with earlier norms of storytelling, experimenting instead with form and style. Thematically, he gnawed at the bones of narrative "truth" and at the "memory" that beats at its heart, sometimes crunching them both to shreds. His points, after all, concern the subjectivity of experience and not simply the politics of contemporary culture.

Steinbeck and Wright, on the other hand, might be said to have returned to (or to be continuing) the sensibilities of the Progressive Era before World War I, seeing their writing as a means for effecting change in society or, at least, of bringing to light problems that the wider society seemed intent upon ignoring. They wrote, of course, because they were good at it and, in some fashion, enjoyed their work. But both their skills and their passions were sparked by the need to speak, to communicate something about the world they lived in.

The three share two commonalities. The first is a desire to express something about the lives of people in America beyond just the members of the traditional American middle class. In fact, all three are concerned with class, though Wright's view of class is overshadowed by questions of race. Second, they are all also deeply concerned with place, though those places might be as distant from each other as Mississippi from Chicago, from Oklahoma, from California. The places they describe are as much characters in their novels as are the people.

Though each writer is distinct in his style and purpose, all three, as we will see through the material in this book, are absolutely products of their time. Faulkner was the oldest, eleven years the senior of Wright and born five years before Steinbeck. This difference, though small in generational terms, did make Faulkner part of World War I cohort, the others having been too young to have possibly participated. Faulkner did not, either, though he wanted to and even claimed to have trained for it.

Ultimately, though, they were formed as writers, all three, by the excesses of the 1920s only to have their talents honed by the disastrous aftermath. As a result, all of the sections of this book pertain to some degree to each of the works and to each writer.

Personal Frame

Today, we strive for a broad vision for the study of art and of literature. What a New Critic might disparage as "literary biography" is now seen as critical to understanding of an author's work. After all, to current students of literature, the work of verbal art does not generate a universe of its own

but is an attempt at creative communication, making it more of a dynamic than a static thing, a dynamic involving both writer and reader and text—as well as that "intention" that Wimsatt and Beardsley found so fallacious. The process involves each of us as readers and, in turn, as students and even as writers.

For us to become expert readers, we must explore the milieus of writers and even of initial audiences, the people the writer was, to some degree or another, immediately addressing. There is an assumed commonality of language and of reference among them: A metaphor is of no use if a range of readers cannot "see" the connection. For this reason, study of literature has had to expand to include much more than that bounded by "the four corners of the page." Today, we see the work of literature within a web of events, personalities, and cultures, including our own. We recognize that art arises from much more than the creative imagination posited by William Wordsworth and the Romantic poets, that it also comes from the generalized past, the experiences of the writer, his or her need to communicate and from the ways in which all of this resonates with readers—even us. It encompasses much more than "text," a static page, but is an experience *through* the page, one of connection between reader and writer.

So, when we study the *literature* of past eras, we study those eras, too. Not their history, exactly, though history certainly plays into it, but those aspects of the time that would have been of particular significance to specific contemporary writers and readers and individual texts. In a sense, we are also studying ourselves, for each of us is a product of all the eras that have come before. Though we may feel we have unique stances and opinions, all of these were developed through personal histories influenced by a wide range of cultural factors.

When we approach a work of literature, either to enjoy it or to study it, we have to remember that all the things making "us" up contribute to the experience. Our subjectivity is not uniquely ours, but is part of the interconnectivity of life and language. We can't simply say, "Well, that's my opinion" and walk away. For our opinions to have any value, even to ourselves, they have to connect—to the work, to other readers, to the milieu, and to our own pasts. This book can help establish those connections.

Historical Frame

New Critical thinking notwithstanding, placing works of art in context is one of the duties of the critic. The context of the Depression Era stems from two great events, the stock-market crash of 1929 and the coming of

the Dust Bowl, the great storms of topsoil lifted from the West and Midwest and deposited to the East. The events of all four of the novels central to this book relate in one way or another to both. In *As I Lay Dying* (1930), the flood during the river crossing stems from the same sort of environmental degradation that caused the Dust Bowl. Degradation of the soil in the South through things like overreliance on cotton helped make migration out of the area necessary for both white Americans and African Americans. The Great Crash only made staying less possible. There is much more, of course, in the way of historical background important to these novels. The rest of this book provides only an introduction.

Though it focuses on that one specific period of time, this book is not a history of the Depression Era. It is more selective, a look at those aspects of American societies significant to the writing of the four central novels, and to the reading of them—then and now. Through the snippets and other pieces presented throughout this book, it is also an invitation to explore the many other writings of the decade and, through them, to explore the personalities, the art, and even the politics of the 1930s. Literature and culture are intertwined; there is every reason to use the one to understand the other—and vice versa.

Though remembered for the woes of economic downturn, the Depression Era was vibrant in the arts and popular culture. Economic downturn was unable to dampen the enthusiasms for entertainment media that had been growing at least since the beginning of the century. Some of the greatest works of thought and art in America were created during this era; it was a lively and creative period, one equal to any other in the long history of American cultures. This book is dedicated to bringing at least a part of it to life for 21st-century readers.