

The Twentieth Century

1914-1945

War, Revolutions, Changes

- Few centuries in the history of humanity can match the lethal intensity of the 20th century's conflicts.
- Advancements in science and technology brought about deadly results.
- Two world wars had a death toll of over 90 million.
- World War I broke out in Europe in 1914, with Great Britain and France fighting against Germany. The U.S. entered in 1917, on the side of Britain and France.
- In 1924, Congress enacted legislation that limited immigration, hoping to control the ethnic makeup of the American population.
- Women were given the right to vote in 1920, with the 19th amendment.

Art/Strife

- Art served as an instrument and occasion for engagement, contestation, and struggle.
- The “real” was no longer sufficient. Twentieth century art and science searched for reality’s “hidden faces.”
- In the 20th century, the cult of novelty and individuality looked for disruption. Themes such as disorder, rupture, breakage, destruction and eradication took hold.
- The Great War (WW I—1914-1918) left a whole continent devastated, with over 40 million human casualties.
- Literature took on an obsessive concern for the underside of reason and the darker side of human ingenuity.
- The avant-garde emerged, using a military term for advancement on the battlefield to mean “newness” in art and literature. Manifestos were written declaring new movements.

Changing Times

- Transformations between the 1920s and 1940s were driven by changes in economics and technology.
- Sexual mores lessened through the theories of Freud.
- The middle class double sexual standard fell somewhat as women's demands for sexual freedom, responsibilities, jobs outside of the home, etc. were being met. Female dress also changed, with lightweight, store-bought clothes replacing heavy, long, restricting garments.
- African Americans became mobile. Around 1915, there was a migration of blacks from the South to take Northern factory jobs.
- By the mid-1920s, Harlem became home to a black population of 150,000.

1920s-1940s

- Numerous conflicts arose that shaped the future. In 1929, the stock market crashed that led to a depression with 25% unemployment.
- In the era between the two wars, the U.S. became a modern nation.
- The country was in strife between the wars and was reunited with World War II.
- The totality of literary output during this period is called American literary modernism.
- There are three main conflicts of literary modernism: 1.) the uses of literary tradition; 2.) the place of popular culture in serious literature; 3.) The question of how engaged in political and social struggle a work of literature should be.

Modernity/Modernism/ Modernization

- The 20th century elevated modernism, modernization, and modernity to a privileged status to which all human activity was destined to advance.
- Modernity came to be synonymous with the value of what made material progress possible—namely modernization.
- Modernization affected the arts, and advancements in technology and industry, including the scientific harnessing and exploitation of national resources.
- “Modernism” is a catch-all phrase for literature produced between the two world wars. Most of it depicts modernity as an experience of loss.
- The meaning in modernist literature often lies in the process of generating meaning.

History/Memory/Trauma

- In the 20th century, memory was a subject of intense cultural interest.
- Philosophers and psychologists in the early 20th century, especially Freud, explored individual experiences of time and memory.
- At the same time, technology tried to standardize time—creating a unifying time measuring system for the globe.
- The pressure toward efficiency and standardization is reflected in the literature of the time.
- In America, the assembly line took form in 1913, with Henry Ford's car factory. This led to the modernization of society.
- Along with Freud's psychoanalytic theories, Einstein's theory of relativity changed how we viewed the world.

History/Memory/Trauma (continued)

- Some artists and writers drew their inspiration from the new technologies, as well as the technological possibilities of photography and film.
- It can be argued that the four greatest influences on the early modern period are Darwin, Freud, Einstein and Picasso.
- The avant-garde artists wanted a complete break from the past. The cry of the modernists was “Make it New!” coined by poet Ezra Pound.
- The slaughter of millions in World War I seemed to many as the end of an era. Now technology made it possible to create warfare that did not require face-to-face confrontation.

Expressionism: 1910-1925

- This period arose in Europe in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as a response to the increasing mechanization and urbanization of society.
- Expressionist writers distorted objective features of the sensory world using symbolism and dreamlike elements. Their works illustrate the alienating and often emotionally overwhelmed sensibilities of Expressionist artists and writers.
- Kafka's writings depict an absurdist view of the world, which he describes in paradoxically lucid terms.
- "Kafkaesque" is a term used as an adjective suggesting something possessing a complex, inscrutable, or bizarre quality.