

**A LEVEL**

**Contextual Information**

# **ENGLISH LITERATURE**

**American Literature 1880-1940**

**Teacher Guide**

**H472/02**



**RUNNYMEDE**

**Lit in colour**

# Overview

**This pack is intended as a starting point for engaging with contextual information relating to the topic *American Literature 1880-1940*.**

Relevant periods, movements and events are glossed with some suggestions for further sources that may prove useful. The selections identified can be used as sources for understanding, support for discussions, as well as starting points for further reading and research (as well as being accessible and student-friendly).

This resource should not be considered exhaustive or content that students are required to learn – these are some starting points for contextual information that may help enhance textual study.

## Lit in Colour

### Lit in Colour partnership

OCR is a named partner for the Lit in Colour project. Lit in Colour was created by Penguin Books UK and [The Runnymede Trust](#), to support UK schools to make the teaching and learning of English literature more inclusive of writers of colour. The campaign published research in 2021 which investigated the barriers to inclusivity schools in England currently face.

Our involvement provides us with additional expertise and support as we diversify our own Literature qualifications.

The research led nature of this work gives us access to a comprehensive view of what teachers and students might want from us as an awarding body.

Through our work with Lit in Colour, we are able to offer a wider range of high quality learning and teaching resources. Our new GCSE and A Level texts are not just accessible but exciting, challenging and enriching learning opportunities for our teachers and students.

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**A note on access:** Where possible we have linked to Open Access sources but this has not always been possible. Some of the sources listed in this document are held by online journal archives which you may have institutional access to. For sources held by JSTOR, we should note that JSTOR does offer free access to 100 articles a month via their free personal account.

**Content warning:** This topic, and its texts, do engage with topics of racism, sexual violence, incest, sexism, suicide. Some of the contextual material and sources here may draw on or refer to these topics. Some sources linked to may feature historical documents including racist terminology and expressions.

# Key terms

**Realism:** refers to literature (and art more broadly) that endeavours to represent its subject matter in as true to life a fashion as possible.

**Naturalism:** as a literary movement, this refers to a period between 1865 and the early 1900s. Naturalism offers a return to realism, aiming towards an objective examination of human behaviour and the power of external forces over human decisions. In literature, the French writer Emile Zola is credited with pioneering the genre.

**Satire:** a term that described art which uses humour, irony, exaggeration or ridicule to expose or criticise immorality or foolishness. It is particularly used as a form of social or political commentary.

**Hegemony:** a term denoting the dominance of a group over another, often supported by cultural norms, ideas or political or economic control.

**The American Dream:** a cultural concept about the ability for any person, from whatever background, to strive for prosperity, equality and contentment in America.

**Manifest Destiny:** the political and cultural belief that the United States had a divine obligation to expand its borders to the Western territories.

**Social mobility:** a term describing a person or group's ability to move to a different social class; it is most often used when describing movement up the social and class hierarchy.

**Reconstruction:** this refers to period between 1865-77 where, after the American Civil War, attempts were made to address the political, social and economic legacy of slavery as well as the reintegration of Southern states who had seceded.

**Abolition:** in the period under study, this refers to the movement to abolish slavery in the United States. Abolitionists in the United States tended to draw from two camps, Black men and women who had fled enslavement and white, religious American citizens.

**Jim Crow:** this is a term derived from blackface minstrelsy and was used as a racial epithet for Black people in the United States. It is also the term used to describe the laws and customs that were instituted to maintain the oppression of Black people after the abolition of slavery.

**Miscegenation:** the mixing of races but, in this context, specifically sexual intercourse and/or marriage between races. Often when discussing miscegenation the implication is of interracial mixing resulting in the bearing of children.

**Colourism:** refers to discrimination on the basis of skin colour, generating certain privileges for lighter-skinned people of colour owing to their visual proximity to whiteness. This specific term is widely attributed to Alice Walker's 1983 text *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*.

**Passing:** the social practice of a member from one group presenting as another. In an American context this most frequently relates to the racial passing of light-skinned or mixed-race Black people presenting as white.

# Publishing context

Throughout the later nineteenth century American novelists, many of them immigrants themselves, turned to the subject of immigration. Willa Cather's most effective work dealt with mid-westerners of Scandinavian origin. Naturalism and interest in rural or pioneer lives proved particularly popular. However, in the aftermath of the First World War, the Twenties saw a shift away from novels of manners towards a spate of novels documenting the roaring elite social scene, as well as the growing sense of dislocation from the rural and a taste for naturalistic novels (see: American naturalism).

The Thirties saw the rise of the hardboiled crime novel, a particularly American genre that specialised in cold, stylised prose featuring violence and vice. Dashiell Hammett's seminal novel *The Maltese Falcon* was published in 1930, soon followed by James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1934) and Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep* (1939) among others.

Alongside the rise of these, one of best-selling novels of the 1930s was Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1936). Set in the southern state of Georgia during the Civil War and the Reconstruction era, the novel's mix of plantation fantasy, historical fiction and romance made it enormously popular. Its success was also indicative of the ways in which the racial values of the white American South were papered over or cheerfully endorsed.

Below we've outlined some key publishing context for the core and suggested texts listed for this topic. The core texts are highlighted in green.

## ***The Portrait of a Lady* by Henry James (1881)**

This novel was first published as a serial in *The Atlantic Monthly* and *Macmillan's Magazine* in 1880-81 and then as a book in 1881. It is one of James's most popular novels and is regarded by critics as one of his finest. James made extensive revisions to the text for the 1908 *New York Edition*, which also includes an important preface by the author. James was nominated for the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1911, 1912, and 1916.

## ***Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain (1884)**

This novel was first published in the United Kingdom in December 1884 and in the United States in February 1885. It was among the first in major American literature to be written throughout in vernacular English. The language and subject matter of the novel continue to be controversial in the United States; as recently as 2016, it was removed from a public school district in Virginia because of its use of racial slurs.

## ***Sister Carrie* by Theodore Dreiser (1900)**

Dreiser had difficulty finding a publisher for *Sister Carrie*. Doubleday & McClure Company accepted the manuscript, but the wife of one of the publishers declared it to be too sordid. Dreiser insisted on publication, but the publisher made no effort to advertise the book and few copies were sold. Between 1900 and 1980, all editions of the novel were of a second altered version. In 1981, Dreiser's unaltered version finally appeared when the University of Pennsylvania Press issued a scholarly edition based on the original manuscript.

## ***My Ántonia* by Willa Cather (1918)**

*My Ántonia* was enthusiastically received in 1918 when it was first published, resulting in a huge boost to Cather's reputation. The novel was shaped by the contribution of Viola Roseboro', Cather's editor at *McClure's Magazine*, who read the original manuscript after it had been repeatedly rejected and suggested to Cather that she should rewrite it from Jim's viewpoint.

## ***The Age of Innocence* by Edith Wharton (1920)**

This was Wharton's twelfth novel and was initially serialized in 1920 in four parts in the magazine *Pictorial Review*. Later that year, it was released as a book by D. Appleton & Company. It is a historical novel, written when Wharton was in her fifties but set in the old New York of her childhood. It won the 1921 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, making Wharton the first woman to win the prize; she was also nominated for the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1927, 1928, and 1930.

## **The Great Gatsby by F. Scott Fitzgerald (1925)**

This was Fitzgerald's third novel. He struggled to decide on a title, considering many options, including *Among Ash Heaps and Millionaires*, *Trimalchio in West Egg* and *Under the Red, White, and Blue*. He finally settled on *The Great Gatsby* after advice from his editor but was never entirely happy with the decision. The novel sold poorly, and its reception was a disappointment to the author. A revival of interest in Fitzgerald after his death led to renewed appreciation of *The Great Gatsby*, which has been widely regarded as a literary masterpiece since the 1970s.

## **Passing by Nella Larsen (1929)**

This was Nella Larsen's second novel, following the publication of *Quicksand* in 1928. *Passing* was a critical success but achieved only modest sales. Following these successful publications, Larsen received a Guggenheim Fellowship, the first Black American woman to do so. She used it to travel to Europe where she worked on a third novel, but never published this or any other longform work.

## **The Sound and the Fury by William Faulkner (1929)**

This was Faulkner's fourth novel, and did not achieve success initially; however, after the publication of his sixth novel, *Sanctuary*, *The Sound and the Fury* received renewed attention and greater recognition. It began as three short stories about the children of the Compson family, but Faulkner decided the work would be better suited to the novel form. Faulkner won the 1949 Nobel Prize for Literature; he also won two Pulitzer Prizes, in 1955 and (posthumously) in 1963.

## **A Farewell to Arms by Ernest Hemingway (1929)**

This was Hemingway's third novel, published first in serial form in *Scribner's Magazine* and then later the same year in book form. The first edition had a print-run of approximately 31,000 copies, and the success of the novel made him financially independent. Hemingway struggled to finish the novel: he reported writing 39 different versions, but the 2012 *Hemingway Library Edition* includes 47. Hemingway received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1954.

## **The Grapes of Wrath by John Steinbeck (1939)**

This was Steinbeck's fifth full length novel. According to *The New York Times*, it was the best-selling book of 1939 and 430,000 copies had been printed by February 1940. The novel was controversial because of its perceived socialist views; Steinbeck said that the resulting anger directed at him from large landowners and bankers was 'completely out of hand'. *The Grapes of Wrath* won the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize for fiction and was cited when Steinbeck won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962.

## **Native Son by Richard Wright (1940)**

This was Wright's first novel and it was an immediate best-seller: it sold 250,000 hardcover copies within three weeks of its publication by the Book-of-the-Month Club on March 1, 1940. The novel was controversial, giving rise to complaints about Wright's presentation of violence in a young Black man. Wright based aspects of the novel on the 1938 arrest and trial of Robert Nixon, executed in 1939 following a series of murders in Los Angeles and Chicago. Wright won a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1939 for his short stories, giving him the resources he needed to complete *Native Son*.

Some other American novels published in 1880-1940 were:

1. *Washington Square* by Henry James (1880)
2. *The Red Badge of Courage* by Stephen Crane (1895)
3. *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin (1899)
4. *The Call of the Wild* by Jack London (1903)
5. *The House of Mirth* by Edith Wharton (1905)
6. *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* by James Weldon Johnson (1912)
7. *Babbitt* by Sinclair Lewis (1922)
8. *An American Tragedy* by Theodore Dreiser (1925)
9. *The Sun Also Rises* by Ernest Hemingway (1926)
10. *Plum Bun: a Novel Without a Moral* by Jessie Redmon Fauset (1929)
11. *The Young Manhood of Studs Lonigan* by James T. Farrell (1934)
12. *Gone With the Wind* by Margaret Mitchell (1936)
13. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston (1937)
14. *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* by Carson McCullers (1940)
15. *Farewell, My Lovely* by Raymond Chandler (1940)

# Wider literary context

## Influences

### Legacy of earlier novelists

Between 1790 and about 1830 the literature of an independent United States was in a kind of post-colonial phase: critics and journalists were anxious that a distinctively American voice should emerge, but many of the models in use, such as the Gothic and the historical novel, were notably European. James Fenimore Cooper produced a series of 'Leatherstocking' novels often based on the Colonists' battles with the French Monarchy in the Seven Years War, modelled on the Waverley novels of Sir Walter Scott. Washington Irving produced two masterpieces of American Gothic still widely read to-day: 'Rip Van Winkle' about a tardy Dutch colonist who sleeps out the Revolution; and 'The Legend of Sleepy Hollow', which plays on the superstitions of the English Colonists.

Nathaniel Hawthorne, best known for 1850's *The Scarlet Letter*, predominantly set his work further in the past to the Puritan settlement of Massachusetts Bay in 1600s, exploring ways in which the Puritan spirit, with its integrity and work ethic, was continually troubled by a dark sense of sin. His work made an immediate impression on European readers. Some of Hawthorne's tales concern the context of the notorious 1692 Salem witch trials, especially the haunting 'Young Goodman Brown' (1835) in which a young newly-wed man forsakes his bride, Faith, at the edge of the New England forest and finds, deep in the trees, a Satanic gathering at which the most esteemed members of his Puritan community are the chief celebrants. Young Goodman Brown realises he can never trust truly and thoroughly in his neighbours, his wife, or the colony again.

Another important American novel was published in 1850: Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*. At this time the American whaling-fleet was the largest in the world, so whaling has been viewed as a metaphor for American frontier experience and for the self-justifying expansionism across the Continent known as 'Manifest Destiny'. Melville's focus is on the obsessive individualism of Captain Ahab, and the whale Moby-Dick himself has been claimed as a symbol of pressing to the limits, 'Otherness' and even God.

Two further significant American novelists both dated from the Civil War (1861-65), and both were women: Louisa May Alcott with *Little Women* (1868) and *Good Wives* (1869), which have a strong claim to be the origin of 'Young Adult' fiction, and Harriet Beecher Stowe and her anti-slavery protest novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). In its time, it was lauded as a keystone of the abolitionist movement, accused as an instigator of the Civil War itself, and divisive among Black writers and artists. Though focused on the cruelty of slavery in the American South, Stowe's crude depictions of Black characters were critiqued from its publication. Stowe's novel in many ways codified some of the cultural stereotypes of Black Americans that would come to dominate the next century including the 'mammy', the 'tragic mulatto' and 'Uncle Tom'. Stowe's protest novel was held in the public imagination as one of the cornerstone texts featuring Black characters, over works written by Black authors themselves. Richard Wright, one of the novelists on OCR's list, titled his short story collection of 1938 in response to Stowe's novel: *Uncle Tom's Children*.

Some American writers kept more strictly to European models and subjects. Edgar Allan Poe continued to work in the Gothic form, often maintaining traditional European settings, like Renaissance Italy in 'The Cask of Amontillado' or the Spanish Inquisition in 'The Pit and the Pendulum'. His ingenious detective stories (the first in the language) are set in Paris, while his science fiction ('A Descent into the Maelstrom', 'The Balloon-Hoax') anticipates the work of Europeans like Jules Verne and H.G. Wells.

Henry James positively preferred to employ European models, especially the cutting-edge work of Turgenev in Russia and George Eliot in England. James felt that American society at the beginning of this topic's period was damagingly parochial by the standards of an older civilisation, so he preferred the denser mazes of European culture and custom. James's most fertile subject is to explore how American innocence (not always all that innocent) 'affronts its destiny', faced with the traditions of the old world. For instance, when she comes to England, Isabel Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) is nearly overpowered by Lord Warburton's moats, castles and enveloping niceness.

### Find out more

['1800-1850'](#) and ['1850-1900'](#) for Books That Shaped America exhibition, Library of Congress

Baldwin, James, ['Everybody's Protest Novel'](#), *Notes of a Native Son* (US: Beacon Press, 1955) p. 13 - 23

Campbell, Donna M., ['Timeline: American Literature'](#), *Literary Movements*, Washington State University

ed. Sundquist, Eric J., ['New Essays on Uncle Tom's Cabin'](#), (Cambridge University Press, 1986)

## American naturalism

Emile Zola had pioneered naturalism in France, a format in which social forces rather than individual characters determine human behaviour. Jack London's short story, 'South of the Slot' (1914) typifies this determinist structure. On the North Side of San Francisco Freddy Drummond is a university professor and a social conservative. South of the 'slot' he becomes a Union Leader and a socialist. Nothing is left to individual choice; everything depends on postal district. Many of the authors on our list contributed to this movement, from Wright to Steinbeck but it is Theodore Dreiser, along with Frank Norris, who are often credited with giving European naturalism an American voice.

Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900) generates fascinating questions on nearly every page about motivation and responsibility. Is it Carrie's talent that makes her a great star on Broadway or does she just play the cards that American urban life puts into her hand? In 1925, twenty-five years after publishing *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser published *An American Tragedy* based on the real-life murder of Grace Brown in 1906. The novel focuses on Clyde Griffiths, an ambitious but poor man raised by missionaries who becomes dissolute. Dreiser's novel is concerned with class, morality and social inevitability, tracking Griffith's youth in Missouri to his young adulthood in Chicago and his later crimes in New York. Clyde's uncertainty as to whether he caused the drowning of his pregnant girlfriend Roberta is never resolved, his attitude described as 'complete mental derangement'. The novel is stuffed with accounts of police procedure, including tampering with evidence, and hyper-realist accounts of the trial. The novel ends with Clyde's execution in the electric chair, the reader still unsure whether Clyde or America is the true villain.

Dreiser's influence on the younger generation can be seen in the work of the major African American novelist, Richard Wright, in his contribution to our list *Native Son* (1940). Wright's protagonist, Bigger Thomas, goes through many bouts of self-examination, remorse, and guilt, yet when he acts it is often with a brutality generated in him by the pressures of racist society.

### Find out more

Binford, Paul, ['American Literary Naturalism: A Passage to Modernity'](#) p.171-185

Newlin, Keith, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of American Literary Naturalism*, 2011

Pizer, Donald:

- ['Late Nineteen-Century American Literary Naturalism: A Re-Introduction'](#), *American Literary Realism* Vol. 38 No. 3 (Spring 2006) p.189-202
- *American Literary Naturalism: Late Essays* (Anthem Press, 2020) available by chapters on JSTOR.

ed. Pizer, Donald, *The Cambridge Companion to American Realism and Naturalism: From Howells to London* (Cambridge University Press, 1995)

## The Harlem Renaissance

One of the results of the Great Migration (see later in this pack) was a growing Black community in New York, particularly in a long-established part of Northern Manhattan known as Harlem. It became host to an intellectual and bohemian phenomenon between the 1910s and late 1930s, known as the Harlem Renaissance.

This was by no means confined to literature but encompassed many of the leading Black cultural figures and movements of the day: sociologists, artists, jazz musicians, writers and university professors. The literary arm of the movement embraced a range of forms and genres, not just poetry but fiction and non-fiction narrative, alongside drama.

The novelists of this movement did explore the diversity of Black experience across boundaries of class, colour and gender, as well as experimenting with genre and form. However, there were debates about what Black literature could and should discuss, especially if works were to be read by a white audience. The history of the theft and exploitation of Black labour and culture was not lost on many commentators of the time. Additionally, given the cultural impact of stereotypical portrayals of Black people by white writers, there were conflicting views as to whether Black fiction should depict unpalatable aspects of Black life and risk fuelling further racist outrage.

The two best-selling books at the time, Carl van Vechten's *N\*\*\*\*\* Heaven* (1926) and Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* (1928), are often criticised today for stirring up a prurient interest among whites in African American 'primitivism', "lovers of life caught up in their own native rhythm" as McKay put it, dancing with girls "like bright batches of colour." Interestingly, neither of these signature books was the work of an African American: McKay was Jamaican; Van Vechten was a white cultural entrepreneur, representative of a paying white audience that flocked to Harlem to see how African Americans lived. In her novel *Passing*, which is dedicated to Van Vechten and his wife, Nella Larsen creates a character, Hugh Wentworth, based on Van Vechten: 'hundreds of white people of Wentworth's type came to affairs in Harlem.'

A lot of Caribbean writers, like McKay, came too, absorbing Caribbean culture into the North American mainstream. Zora Neale Hurston (whose most well-known work *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is on our Women in Literature text list), spent a great deal of



time researching and tracing the impact of immigrants from the British West Indies, which was the largest source of non-African American Black migrants at the time.

The novels of the Harlem Renaissance spanned genres from social satires like Rudolph Fisher's *The Walls of Jericho* (1928), Wallace Thurman's *The Blacker the Berry* (1929) and George Schuyler's *Black No More* (1931), to detective novels like Fisher's *The Conjure-Man Dies* (1932), as well as social realism. Among this latter genre are the novels of 'passing', explore the consequences of light-skinned Black people choosing to pass as white. Included in this are the novels of Nella Larsen and Jessie Redmon Fauset.

There were also forays into avant-garde modernism, notably with Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923). Toomer's novel is a multimodal circular narrative, combining prose, poetry and play-like extracts of dialogue. His fragmented narrative focusing predominantly on the lives of women, explores ideas of alienation, gender and race ranging across the South and circling back to the North after the pattern of the Great Migration.

The 1925 anthology *The New Negro: An Interpretation* offers a selection of extracts from a range of popular fiction writers, poets and essayists of the Harlem Renaissance. A unifying feature of these is their evocation of the vitality of Harlem: well-seasoned dialogue in basement cafes, piano-players 'out-plunking each other', and Black Americans fresh from the South coming up the subway stairs and 'freezing to the spot' at their first astonished view of Harlem.

## Find out more

['Harlem Renaissance'](#), History, updated 21<sup>st</sup> January 2021

['A New African American Identity: The Harlem Renaissance'](#), National Museum of African American History

['Issues and Debates in African American Literature'](#), University of Delaware

Bland, Cierra, ['Nella Larsen and Passing in NYPL's Collections'](#), New York Public Library, 29<sup>th</sup> November 2021

Haslett, Tobi, ['The Man Who Led the Harlem Renaissance—and His Hidden Hungers'](#), *The New Yorker*, 14<sup>th</sup> May 2018

Hutchinson, George, *The Cambridge Companion to the Harlem Renaissance*, 2007

Hutchinson, George, ['Harlem Renaissance'](#), britannica.com. updated 17<sup>th</sup> March 2021

Locke, Alain, *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, 1925

Wright, Richard

- ['Blueprint for Negro Writing'](#) (1937), taken from ed. Mitchell, Angelyn *Within the circle: an anthology of African American literary criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the present day*, (1994) p. 97-106
- ['Between Laughter and Tears'](#), *New Masses* 5<sup>th</sup> October 1937

## The inter-war years

The post-First World War exchange rate meant comparatively poor American writers could live very cheaply in Europe, so John Dos Passos, Fitzgerald and Hemingway all became part of a transatlantic bohemian community. Most of these young men had served in the War, often in the Canadian or European forces, and this meant they had plenty of raw, often brutal experience to fuel their writing. The most distinctive stylist among them, Hemingway, relied on a 'simple declarative' sentence that is still held up as an American model, hinting at emotional turbulence under a calm, even elliptical exterior. His short story 'Big Two Hearted River' is a tender exploration of post-traumatic stress disorder.

Even William Faulkner turned up in Paris briefly, but his experimental fiction is strongly rooted in American soil. His work is mostly set in the fictional Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi. Often, in typically Modernist fashion, his characters are left to tell the story themselves, in snippets of colourful speech or fragments of internal monologue. For instance, *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) chronicles the decline of an Old Southern family in the first part of the twentieth century. Faulkner begins with the challenged perceptions of an intellectually disabled brother, who explains more than he knows; then moves on to a monologue by the pragmatist of the family, who tries to conceal his meanness; then to a third brother, at a Northern University, who decides to give up on the whole charade and is just about to kill himself. The only shred of hope comes from an old African American servant, going quietly about her business, singing in church on Easter Day.

If the Modernist novel, especially in Faulkner's hands, explores the break-up of nineteenth century values and the fragmentation of twentieth century American consciousness, the post-the First World War period is also absorbed in the creeping influence of American capital. As the nation's economic strength gradually revealed itself, excess cash fuelled the extravagance and hedonism of what is now called the Jazz Age. Fitzgerald's novella about the heady despair of party-going, *The Great Gatsby* (1925), and his *Tales of the Jazz Age* (1922) embody the spirit of these times.

When Wall Street crashed in October 1929 it ushered in the first thoroughgoing depression in United States history. Fitzgerald called it 'The Crack-Up', signalling his own descent into uncontrolled alcoholism and America's into unexpected austerity. Literature reflected changing circumstances by turning to tough escapist modes, such as the 'hard-boiled' detective novel of Dashiell Hammett, or pulp science fiction or superhero comics. More serious fiction sometimes flirted with Russian Marxism and its relationship with the trade union movement, reflected in such key fictions as Steinbeck's *In Dubious Battle* (1936) and Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940).

## Find out more

Brooks, Cleanth, *William Faulkner: First Encounters*, 1983

McCann, Sean, *Gumshoe America: Hard-boiled Crime Fiction and the Rise and Fall of New Deal Liberalism*, (Duke University Press, 2000)

Temple, Emily, 'A Century of Reading' series published on *Literary Hub*, October 2018

['A Century of Reading: The 10 Books that Defined the 1900s'](#)

['A Century of Reading: The 10 Books that Defined the 1910s'](#)

['A Century of Reading: The 10 Books that Defined the 1920s'](#)

['A Century of Reading: The 10 Books that Defined the 1930s'](#)

## Impact

One of the most influential of America's literary exports in this period was the Western. In its original form this mythologized cattle-drovers, often of Anglo-Saxon extraction, as they drove westward, and explored the 'law' of the frontier, which often resembles rough justice, especially for the minorities who get in their way. These might be Mormons, as in Zane Gray's *Riders of the Purple Sage* (1912), or thieves and tricksters, as in Owen Wister's *The Virginian* (1902). Bret Harte wrote about clashes with Spaniards left over from their own attempts to colonise the West, while Faulkner's short-stories feature dealings with Native Americans, as in 'Red Leaves' (1930). Often the most intriguing Western stories illustrate female domestication of these outposts of gun-law, as in the romance between Wister's hard-bitten Virginian and the schoolmarm, Molly Stark Wood.

Apart from Beecher Stowe and Alcott, the most influential female fiction writer of the nineteenth century is probably Kate Chopin. Her 1899 novella *The Awakening* takes the point-of-view of a clever woman prone to self-indulgence, exploring the ideas of self-definition and sexual energy that mark first wave feminism. The reader is left to determine whether Edna Pontellier's eventual suicide should be considered tragic loss or feminist victory. Some of Chopin's short stories are so sexually unconstrained they still have power to challenge today, especially 'The Storm' (1898), where French Creole ex-lovers make love during foul weather, then return quietly to their marriages as the (highly symbolic) storm subsides.

# Social and historical context

This topic's time period, 1880-1940, reflect some of the most significant years of American expansion, the evolution of a powerful economy after the Civil War, and the impact of the United States on the world stage after the First World War, concluding with consequences of the Great Depression and America's entrance to Second World War. The novel with the earliest setting, Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*, takes us back long before Gatsby to the tough, luxurious days of old New York, while Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady*, set at a similar period, explores the impact of American money on the European marriage market. Mark Twain's theme in *Huckleberry Finn* is the continued dividedness of the nation after the Civil War.

The break-up of the Old South led to the Great Migration of African Americans to the urban Northeast, Midwest and West. Richard Wright's brilliant naturalist novel *Native Son* explores the booming metropolis of Chicago, while Nella Larsen offers a study of people of colour passing as white in booming twenties New York. Dreiser and Cather explore the changes to American culture as the impact of unrestricted European immigration begins to be felt, while Faulkner's and Hemingway's novels reflect two schools of American Modernism which may be called the extensive and the minimal respectively.

In this section we've offered an introductory overview and directions to valuable resources for some of the key social and historical events during the period covered by the texts suggested for this topic.

## Manifest Destiny and the American Dream

The term **Manifest Destiny** was coined in 1845 by newspaper editor John O'Sullivan and refers to the political and cultural belief that the United States had a divine obligation to expand its borders and spread both democracy and capitalism across the North American continent. At its core was a pervasive racist belief in the inherent cultural and racial superiority of white Americans in comparison to Indigenous and Central American people. This racist belief was a key tenet behind governmental policy as well as justifying the violent displacement and conflict against Indigenous people as the United States expanded into the west.

The idea of the **American Dream** has undergone some revision within the public consciousness. It can be seen, in essence, as a reflection of the supposed values of the United States: equality, liberty, justice and democracy across the nation. More an idea than a specifically named concept, the American Dream also refers to the opportunity to achieve this liberty and justice being available to anyone settled in America – though we can already see from the colonists' treatment of Indigenous people that this principle only applied to White Americans. – reference to African Americans at the time?

Naturally what Dream might be considered American changes along with American society. At the turn of the century until America's entrance in the First World War, literature about the community of small towns reflected ideas of building community and accessing opportunity no matter your start in life. Both Sherwood Anderson's short story collection *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) and Edgar Lee Master's poetry collection *Spoon River* (1915) offer a contemporaneous perspective as to the complicated reality; these ideas are reflected with the benefit of hindsight in Thornton Wilder's 1938 play *Our Town*, which is set between 1901 and 1913.

During the economic boom of the 1920s, rampant capital and acquiring wealth seemed to be the new conception of the American Dream. This was quickly undone by the Great Depression. It is during this period that the formal use of the term 'American Dream' can be found. James Truslow Adams used it in his 1931 work *The Epic of America*, where he defines the American Dream as: "a dream of a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position."

### Find out more

['The American Dream in the Jazz Age'](#), BBC Bitesize

['The American Dream in the Twentieth Century'](#), Encyclopedia.com provided by Cengage Learning

['Manifest Destiny'](#), History updated April 2019

['Manifest Destiny'](#), US History.org

Diamond, Anna, ['The Original Meanings of the "American Dream" and "America First" Were Starkly Different From How We Use Them Today'](#), *Smithsonian Magazine*, October 2018

Glantz, Jen, ['Here's How the American Dream Has Changed over the Years'](#), Reader's Digest, updated 13<sup>th</sup> October 2021

Hegleson, Jeffrey, '[American Labor and Working-Class History, 1900–1945](#)' in American History, Oxford Research Encyclopedia, 31 August 2016

Naylor, Gloria, '[Gloria Naylor, Novel Reflections on the American Dream](#)', *American Masters Digital Archive* (WNET), 28 Jun 2000

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Perkins, Bradford, '[Manifest Destiny](#)' in *The Cambridge History of American Foreign Relations*, Vol. 1, (Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 170–199.

Scott, Donald M., '[The Religious Origins of Manifest Destiny](#)' from *Divining America: Religion in American History*, TeacherServe, National Humanities Center

Wills, Matthew, '[James Truslow Adams: Dreaming up the American Dream](#)', JSTOR Daily, 18<sup>th</sup> May 2015

## The legacy of slavery, Jim Crow and American constructions of race

Though only *Huckleberry Finn* of the texts on the OCR list is set in a period prior to the abolition of slavery, slavery's legacy on American culture is something that cannot be ignored. A profoundly inhumane system and practice, slavery (itself a product of racism) helped shape America's understanding and constructions of race. It also formed the central cause of the American Civil War (1861-65). Most Northern states had abolished slavery by 1804 and as the Union expanded to the West and sought to admit new states, there was much contention over whether these Western states would be admitted as free or slave states.

In this section we've provided some links to resources and institutions that have teaching materials about enslavement in the American South. PBS has a collection of resources covering [America's journey through slavery](#) with summaries, links to primary sources and teacher guides. The National Museum of African American History and Culture has also just launched a fully digital version of its permanent exhibition Slavery and Freedom through [Searchable Museum](#).

As *Huckleberry Finn* features Jim, an enslaved man who has escaped to avoid being sold to a plantation and separated from his wife and children, it may prove instructive to explore the [Fugitive Slave Acts](#). These required the capture and return of enslaved people who had escaped to free states, like [Anthony Burns](#) or [Thomas Sims](#) or [Margaret Garner](#). Likewise, it may be useful to explore [the Dred Scott case](#) which began as a fight for Scott, who had escaped enslavement, to assure his freedom and ended with the denial of citizenship to Black Americans free or enslaved.

### Reconstruction

The time period covered by OCR's texts begins just after the Reconstruction Era (1865-77). Though brief, these twelve years saw the post-civil war country attempt to reckon with the social, cultural and economic legacy of slavery, as well as find ways to reabsorb the Southern states who had seceded. Reconstruction saw the passing of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the American constitution which had major implications for the legal rights of African American people.

Though President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation freeing all slaves held in Confederate states in 1863, it was the Thirteenth Amendment that formally abolished slavery in 1865. The Fourteenth granted equal citizenship rights to the formerly enslaved as well as equal protection under the law in 1868. In 1870, the Fifteenth Amendment expanded the right to vote to formerly enslaved men or Freedmen (women had not yet been enfranchised) who otherwise met the legal criteria for example, owning property. The United States began to see African American political representatives, with sixteen Congress representatives at the national level and approximately 600 or so Black representatives in state legislatures.

The advances made by free Black people generated hostility, incensing many white Americans, especially in former Southern confederate states, despite reparations paid to former slave owners. This led to attempts to find legal ways for white Americans to continue to dominate public and economic life.

Efforts to expand property ownership to enable freedmen and formerly enslaved people the ability to purchase or rent land were stymied, often due to Black Codes, and later Jim Crow laws. This is also the era that birthed the Ku Klux Klan, an explicitly racist, white nationalist organisation, which began its terror campaign across the South. This effectively ended in a new white hegemony, with African Americans enjoying their new-found freedom but only behind barriers of segregationist legislation.

## Find out more

[‘Reconstruction’](#), Encyclopaedia Britannica

[‘Reconstruction’](#), History

[‘Reconstruction and Its Aftermath’](#), The African American Odyssey: A Quest for Full Citizenship, Library of Congress

[‘The Reconstruction Era and the Fragility of Democracy’](#), Facing History

Janney, Caroline, [‘Lost Cause, The’](#), *Encyclopedia Virginia*, Virginia Humanities, 14<sup>th</sup> December 2021

McCurry, Stephanie, [‘The Confederacy Was an Antidemocratic, Centralized State’](#), *The Atlantic*, 21<sup>st</sup> June 2020

Miller, Rann, [‘How Racist Ideas Shaped the Era of Reconstruction’](#), *Black Perspectives*, 18<sup>th</sup> August 2020

## Constructions of race

American constructions of race are built in the shadow of slavery, which fueled fears of **miscegenation** and shaped and influenced **colourism** within the Black community. Chattel slavery in the United States had ended only fifteen years prior to the start of the period under study in this Literature topic. During slavery, skin tone was often used as a way to delineate those enslaved people who would work indoors or in the master’s house as opposed to those kept labouring in the fields. This discrimination on the basis of skin tone is referred to now as colourism (a term widely attributed to Alice Walker’s 1983 text *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*). It neatly describes how certain treatment of lighter-skinned people of colour were generated owing to their visual proximity to whiteness.

Widespread concern over the result of miscegenation (which, at this stage, had predominantly been enacted through sexual violence by white men) and the claims these mixed children could make in a society where they were no longer chattel created fertile ground for the passing of laws against miscegenation. In addition, other systems sprang up in slavery’s place to re-codify social hierarchies based on race.

One way this was achieved was through the ‘one-drop rule’ that classed anyone with *any* degree of Black ancestry as legally Black, regardless of skin colour. This ‘one-drop rule’ functioned to limit the legal rights and status of anyone considered to be Black on ancestral terms, but also helped codify blood quantum conceptions of race. This in turn set the terms for states to pass so-called Jim Crow laws as ways to get around the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendment.

## Find out more

[‘Historical Foundations Of Race’](#), National Museum of African American History

Davis, F. James, [excerpt from \*Who is Black? One Nation’s Definition\*](#) (Duke University Press, 1991) provided by the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS)

hooks, bell, [‘Chapter 1: Loving Blackness as Political Resistance’](#), *Black Looks: race and representation*, (South End Books, 1992)

## Jim Crow and segregation

Jim Crow is the name given to the racial caste system operating in the United States broadly between 1877 and the 1960s. It is very much the racial and cultural context underlying the period under study in this topic. This system operated to treat Black Americans as second-class citizens and was based fundamentally on white supremacy, the idea that white people were superior to Black people, and people of colour more broadly. The laws and expected social etiquette of the era are all determined by this belief.

These laws established legal segregation between white and Black people and, after Plessy vs Ferguson court case, the doctrine of ‘separate but equal.’ Of course, in practice only the separate took root. This segregation extended from schools, public transportation, places of worship, hospital wings, restaurants, shops, parks, swimming pools, library, prisons, whole neighbourhoods, even towns (resulting from curfews preventing Black people’s entrance after certain times).

There was also a campaign of terror including public lynchings of Black citizens and the Ku Klux Klan had a steady foothold in many Southern states despite its official ‘dissolution’ in 1871 (it was officially revived in 1915, then again in 1950).

States also found ways to circumvent the Fifteenth Amendment’s enfranchisement of Black people through further regulations. For example, only allowing those to vote whose grandfather had been able to vote; those who paid poll taxes; establishing rigged literacy tests designed to prevent formerly enslaved people who had not received an education from voting.

In Mississippi, where Richard Wright was born and raised (only the second generation of his family not to be enslaved), they set a precedent for other Southern states with the 'Mississippi Plan'. This was designed explicitly to prevent Black men from voting in 1890, in spite of Mississippi being the first state to send an African American senator, Hiram Revels, to Congress in 1870. Richard Wright grew up under the cruel and segregationist practices instilled by these laws.

Though Jim Crow is mostly linked to the Southern states, it should be clear that segregationist laws and practices were applied across the country. In Nella Larsen's *Passing*, Irene and Clare reconnect while passing at a whites only hotel in Chicago, Illinois.

**Passing**, the social practice of a member from one group presenting as another, in an American context most frequently relates to the racial passing of light-skinned or mixed-race Black people presenting as white. Presenting and being accepted as white meant being assimilated into white culture and receiving its attendant legal, social and economic benefits. The history of lighter-skinned Black people passing in the Jim Crow period cannot be divorced from the implications of colourism, as well as the social construction of race in America. As F. James Davis writes, "[t]he concept of "passing" rests on the one-drop rule and on folk beliefs about race and miscegenation, not on biological or historical fact."

The impacts of colourism for darker-skinned Black people in the United States are grave indeed, not least because there's no way to pass to avoid cruelty or violence. Wallace Thurman's *The Darker the Berry* (1929) explicitly explores the psychological impacts of being a dark-skinned Black girl in America at the turn of the century. Thurman's depiction of Emma Lou's experiences with racism point sharply to the ways in which her visible blackness makes her a target, but that colorism within the community (and within her more light-skinned family) generate an internal insecurity and hypervigilance. We see this with Larsen's Irene, where her treatment of her much darker skinned maid, Zulena, is objectifying and condescending.

Given the difficulties faced by African American people in the South, this resulted in what's known as The Great Migration. Over the course of 50 years (between 1916 to around 1970) over 6 million Black Americans migrated from the rural South to the North and to the Midwest. Many Black people found a new life in Northern cities, including Chicago, Detroit and New York. The migration of African Americans in these early years of twentieth century New York, and the evolution of the stereotype of the 'City Negro', are vividly described in James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912).

## Find out more

['A Brief History of Jim Crow'](#), Constitutional Rights Foundation

['Jim Crow Laws'](#), American Experience, Public Broadcasting Service

['Understanding Jim Crow \(Setting the Setting\)'](#), Facing History and Ourselves

Glotzer, Anna, ['Richard Wright's 'Native Son' and Paul Robeson's Othello: Representations of Black Masculinity in Contemporary Adaptations of 'Othello'](#), *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, Vol. 51, No. 2, (Fall 2018), p. 27–67,.

Pilgrim, David, ['What was Jim Crow'](#), Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia, Ferris State University, updated 2012

Pinckney, Darryl, ['Passing for White: A Literary History'](#), *Literary Hub*, 15<sup>th</sup> October 2018

Shafer, Ronald G., ['The 'Mississippi Plan' to keep Blacks from voting in 1890: 'We came here to exclude the Negro'](#), *The Washington Post*, 1<sup>st</sup> May 2021

Thompson, Maxine S., and Verna M. Keith, ['The Blacker the Berry: Gender, Skin Tone, Self-Esteem, and Self-Efficacy'](#), *Gender and Society*, Vol. 15, No. 3, (June 2001), p.336–57

## The Gilded Age

By 1880 the United States had absorbed much of the human and financial cost of a Civil War that had claimed approximately 500,000 casualties, and fortunes were being made on both East and West Coasts. Edith Wharton was to write of the flower-shops, assembly-rooms, up-market weekends and world-class museums of New York, Capital of High Finance in the so-called 'Gilded Age'.

This term, originating with the arch-satirist Mark Twain, hints that there was plenty of wealth about, but not evenly distributed, in thin veneers rather than solid structures. There were many signs of social strain, including the collapse of the Southern economy during the Civil War and after Reconstruction, the poverty of former slaves, and especially the unregulated influx of cheap labour from Europe flocking to take advantage of the higher wages in an economy sometimes growing too fast for its own good. It was a period of rapid economic growth but enormous, and conspicuous, disparity. Industrialisation led to a rise in factories, mines and especially railroads; track for the railroads doubled between 1880 and 1920 across America.

On the Pacific Coast, Frank Norris charted the exploitative power of a railway combine in his monumental novel, *The Octopus* (1901); Upton Sinclair also produced his gritty, near documentary-style polemic, *The Jungle* (1906), about the key railhead, Chicago. The book explores a whole grisly food-chain: beasts come by rail from Middle America, Lithuanian Jews turn up for work at the colossal abattoirs and stockyards of Chicago, while real estate men charge them extortionate rents for shanty-town housing. From

the early twentieth century the United States was well on its way to colonising the world markets, using economic rather than military power. This is shown in Conrad's novel, *Nostramo* (1904), where the sanctimonious American financier, Holroyd, acquires a 'controlling interest' in the finances of a fictional South American Republic, all without leaving his comfortable United States.

This period is marked by the inflated wealth of many famous names in American business: Rockefeller, Carnegie, J. P. Morgan, Vanderbilt among others. These men were known as 'captains of industry' or 'robber barons' for their exploitative business practices, depending on your vantage point. Between 1860 and 1900, 2% of American households owned roughly a third of the nation's wealth.

America was now moving so fast and growing so big that some of the older settlers were getting left behind. Willa Cather explores in *O Pioneers* (1913), *The Song of the Lark* (1915) and especially *My Ántonia* (1918) the whole bittersweet saga of the Middle West, so recently transformed by hard work to embody the dreams of immigrants from Middle-Europe, but now leapfrogged by a civilisation hurrying westward. Sinclair Lewis also wrote of about these lonely towns on the Great Plains, especially in *Main Street* (1920), a kind of American *Madame Bovary*. Once again Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) also reflects on these experiences, where Nick Carraway traces 'deep in the wheat' the source of the characters' dreams and disappointments: 'We were all Westerners'. None of them quite fits into that World's Metropolis, New York, home of everything but US government.

## Find out more

['America's Gilded Age: Robber Barons and Captains of Industry'](#), Maryville University

['Gilded Age'](#), History, updated 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2020

['The Gilded Age'](#), Lumen Learning

Nitschke, Christoph, and Mark Rose, ['Financial Crises in American History'](#), American History, Oxford Research Encyclopedias of American History

O'Donnell, Edward T., 'American in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era', The Great Courses ([coursebook available via the Internet Archive](#))

Smith, Adam IP, ['Who were the tycoons of the Gilded Age? Meet the ruthless "robber barons" who made millions'](#), History Extra, originally in *BBC History Magazine*, November 2016

University of Iowa, ['The Golden Age of American Railroad'](#) from Exhibitions page on University Libraries Iowa

## Prosperity and depression 1920-1935

Although America had been through several cycles of boom and bust over the last 100 years, the most famous period of great prosperity followed by economic decline is in the Twenties and Thirties. Many of the texts are in some way affected by the events of these decades.

### The Roaring Twenties

The Twenties in America is often referred to as the Roaring Twenties, a name that signifies the enormous pace of technological, economic and social change that took place in the wake of the First World War.

America had only entered the First World War in its final year and while they had seen the death of over 100,000 of their soldiers, they had not faced any significant damage to infrastructure or land unlike Europe. This enabled America to not just draw on its own natural resources and develop further trade with Europe but was also significantly better placed to take advantage of increasing industrialisation.

This is a period often described as one of enormous consumer consumption with the twin introduction of new labour-saving home appliances and hire purchase, or credit. This enabled even everyday Americans to be able to invest in new technologies in a way that previously would only have been available to the upper class.

Although by this point in time cars, trains, and planes had already been invented, the Twenties are notable for Henry Ford's invention of the Model T car and his introduction of the assembly line technique, enabling Ford to produce more cars to meet demand than most other factories.

The Twenties are also notable for the introduction of Prohibition in 1920. This banned the sale and importing of alcohol but did not ban or criminalise its consumption. The Temperance Movement had made enormous gains influencing American politics at the start of the twentieth century, positioning alcohol as a gateway vice that enabled immoral behaviour, violence and irresponsible

parenthood. The contradiction at the heart of Prohibition enabled the rise of stockpiling alcohol as well as illegal distillation and smuggling, as well as providing a huge gap in the market that organised crime was able to fill.

This period was also significant as a period of transition in societal attitudes towards women and understanding of traditional gender roles. The Suffragette movement had been agitating for the enfranchisement of women since the late 1800s and finally achieved their goal in 1920, with [restrictions](#) (e.g. the vote was not equally extended to African American or Native American women). As in the United Kingdom, a greater number of women had undertaken work outside of the home which had afforded them cultural and economic independence that young women were not eager to lose. The fin de siècle's New Woman morphed into the figure drawn by Fitzgerald: the Flapper, who came to embody this new economic personal and sexual freedom in the wake of Edwardian values of the time.

For more information on the cultural output from America at this time, the Harlem Renaissance and Rise of Hollywood sections of this contextual pack are a good place to start. It's in the 1920s that film embraces sound, with the American film *The Jazz Singer* (1927) proving that sound films were not just possible but profitable.

All this prosperity and economic stability however was also built on the back of increasing isolationism in American politics, as well as fears around immigration. 1924's Immigration Act solidified a quota-based immigration system that inherently prioritised white immigrants from Western European countries and completely prohibited immigration from the Asian continent. This othering of migrants and fear of difference is clearly reflected in the revival of the Ku Klux Klan who, by 1925, had around four million members and had staged March in the nation's capital. (For more on America's stance on immigration, please see the Contextual Information pack for *The Immigrant Experience*).

The greater degree of consumption and the implications of modern technology of this period had profound impacts on American agriculture. New technologies replaced swathes of farm workers and while yields increased, demand did not increase in equal rate. The Twenties, like the Gilded Age before it, was a time of unequal prosperity, where roughly 40% of Americans were still living poverty throughout the decade. The disparity between the rich and the poor was enormous and becoming ever-more conspicuous.

## Find out more

'[The Roaring Twenties](#)', History, updated 11<sup>th</sup> March 2021

'[Roaring Twenties](#)', Encyclopaedia Britannica

PBS, '[The Roaring 20s](#)', American Experience

Reid, Alanah, '[The Roaring Twenties in America](#)', Historic Newspapers, updated 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2021

Thulin, Lila, '[What Caused the Roaring Twenties? Not the End of a Pandemic \(Probably\)](#)', *Smithsonian Magazine*, 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2021

## The Great Depression

The Great Depression was precipitated by the Wall Street Crash of 1929. This [archive piece](#) from *The Guardian* in 1929 offers an excellent contemporaneous account while [this Historic Newspapers blog](#) offers a detailed overview and consideration of both American and British newspaper headlines. [This article](#) for BBC History Extra offers a little more perspective as to what factors contributed toward the Crash.

The Great Depression is ultimately the result of the unfortunate combination of this stock market crash and far-reaching drought across America. This is known as the Dust Bowl and was America's worst drought in 300 years. The combination of this financial instability and the destruction of agricultural land was a perfect recipe for mass unemployment and grinding poverty. In the first year of the Depression, the industrial production of the United States had fallen by 50% and America had already become used to the ubiquity of breadlines, soup kitchens and encampments for the unhoused.

By the early years of the Depression, the Midwest had experienced not just broken American Dreams, but genuine poverty. After generations of exploitation by landlords and technocrats many of the longer settled lands in the West had been rendered infertile, over-farmed into a dustbowl. Settlers who had farmed small-holdings for generations were literally bulldozed off the map to create gargantuan agrarian combines.

By the time Roosevelt was elected in 1932, the unemployment rate was just under 24% of the population. Roosevelt's election marked a change in political and fiscal policy, promising a New Deal for economic recovery. Roosevelt introduced a series of laws designed to allow the federal government to enact sweeping changes, for example: closing banks; offering emergency relief; generating construction jobs through the Civil Works Administration; regulating Wall Street. During this period, Roosevelt's government introduced a swathe of public culture and infrastructure projects to generate employment and improve the national infrastructure. Works Progress Administration was created in 1935, enabling the hiring of 8.5 million people in a series of the social



and cultural programmes across the United States. Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) stresses the integrity and morality of the victims of the Dust Bowl. Steinbeck argues, like many at the time, for a 'big state' solution for the Okies' blameless impoverishment, extending Roosevelt's vision.

But many still clung to fundamentalist beliefs in a free market economy, and unscrupulous populist leaders played on their superstitions. Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men* (1946) is a study of the appeal and brutality of the thirties populist leader, Huey 'The Kingfish' Long.

## Find out more

'[Stock Market Crash of 1929](#)', History, updated 27<sup>th</sup> April 2021

'[Your guide to the Great Depression](#)', BBC History Revealed in *History Extra*, 14<sup>th</sup> April 2020

Naylor, Gloria, '[Gloria Naylor, Novel Reflections on the American Dream](#)', *American Masters Digital Archive* (WNET), 28 Jun 2000

Norris, Floyd, '[Looking Back at the Crash of '29](#)', *The New York Times*, 1999 (Archived)

Reid, Alanah, '[From Boom to Bust: Timeline of the Great Depression, 1930s](#)', Historic Newspapers, updated 14<sup>th</sup> December 2021

Nitschke, Christoph, and Mark Rose, '[Financial Crises in American History](#)', *American History*, Oxford Research Encyclopedias of American History

## The rise of Hollywood

The period under study in this topic also coincides with the development of cinema and the rise of Hollywood as a dominant cultural and economic force. American cinematic culture is marked by the legacy of D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* in 1915, itself based on the novel *The Clansmen* (1905) by Thomas Dixon, which focuses on a Northern and Southern family during the American Civil War. It was, at the time, the longest film to have been made, was the first film to be screened in the White House and is noted for its technical contributions to cinema. It was also unambiguously a white supremacist, revisionist history of the Civil War and Reconstruction and was released to protest not least by the NAACP (the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People). The release of this film, which portrayed the Ku Klux Klan as almost chivalric protectors of white women's virtue, was credited with generating the revival of the Ku Klux Klan and its campaign of racialised terror and violence.

As cinema moved into its sound era after the release of 1927's *The Jazz Singer*, the form saw a huge leap forward in terms of its approach to longer narrative. The films of the late 1920s, like the comedies of Jean Harlow, demonstrated a conflicted perspective on women and sexual liberty, reflecting the freedom and lassitude afforded to the prosperous in the 1920s. This period also saw the establishment of the Big Five studios (Paramount Pictures, Metro Goldwyn Mayer, Warner Brothers, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox and RKO) and the **studio system** which was a method of production where films were made entirely by the movie studio with all talent from cast, crew, directors and writers all under salaried contract, often for quite long terms.

After the Wall Street Crash, Hollywood saw the rise of the gangster film as well as a focus on stories about the underclass. Throughout this period we see a bevy of adapted screenplays, most often from plays and novels. Many European literary classics became Hollywood staples: *Dracula* (1931), *Frankenstein* (1931) followed by *The Bride of Frankenstein* (1935), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1935), *David Copperfield* (1935), *Pride and Prejudice* (1940).

Two key female stars of this period were Joan Crawford and Barbara Stanwyck. Crawford had played flappers in the Twenties but during the Thirties frequently played in rags to riches stories. In 1930's *Paid* she was a shopgirl seeking revenge for false imprisonment; in *Possessed* (1931) she plays a factory girl who rises to mistress of a wealthy would-be politician, played by Clark Gable. Both of these reflected a desire from cinemagoers to see some rise from humble circumstances with gumption and be rewarded. Notably, both were adapted from plays. Many of Barbara Stanwyck's celebrated dramatic roles were in adaptations of novels, such as Edna Ferber's *So Big* or Olive Higgins Prouty's moving *Stella Dallas*.

The MGM musical *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) is also based on a novel, one written for children by L. Frank Baum from 1900, in which the heroine, Dorothy, gets a very American lesson in individualism. She must trust not in the Great Wizard, but in her own red-slippered feet.

In discussing the cultural dominance of Hollywood as well as the influence of literature in its creative output, the film adaptation of Margaret Mitchell's best selling novel *Gone with the Wind* (1939) was an outsized success. It became the highest earning film made until that point (and adjusting for inflation remains at the top of the box office). As has been discussed previously, Mitchell's novel is often seen as a Confederate romance and its depiction of both the history of slavery and the Civil War were seen as problematic at the time. When news of the novel's adaptation to screen was announced, it was met with real concern by the Black community and leaders lobbied for the screenplay to redress some of the faults of the novel.

The film was nominated for thirteen Oscars, ten of which it won. One of these was to Hattie McDaniel, who became the first Black person to win an Oscar, for her performance as Mammy. McDaniel had been unable to attend the premiere of *Gone with the Wind* in Alabama due to it being held at a white only cinema. During the Oscar ceremony itself, McDaniel was seated at a segregated table off to the side of the ballroom, an exception made for the ceremony as the Coconut Grove was also a white only hotel.

Two major novels from the close of our period reflect the rise of Hollywood, its conveyor-belt production system and its iconic stars. One of these, Nathanael West's *The Day of the Locust* (1939), turns the whole process into a Modernist nightmare; the other, Fitzgerald's unfinished *The Last Tycoon* (1941), explores the qualities that distinguish a movie mogul from ordinary human beings, the touches by which a producer can stir the dreams of millions of cinemagoers with little course corrections in the screening room.

## Find out more

['Hollywood 1929-1941'](#) in *Historic Events for Students: The Great Depression*, Encyclopedia.com last updated 24<sup>th</sup> November 2021

['Studio System'](#), Hollywood Lexicon

Lev, Peter, ['Hollywood Studios'](#) in *Cinema and Media Studies*, Oxford Bibliographies, last modified 26<sup>th</sup> February 2020

Regev, Ronny, ['Hollywood Works: How Creativity Became Labor in the Studio System'](#), *Enterprise & Society*, Vol. 17 No. 3, (January 2016), p. 591–617

# Thematic context questions

Below we've provided a series of questions you can use to help students in engaging with thematic context of the topic. These can be particularly useful when analysing unseen extracts but are questions they can ask about any passage or text studied in the *American Literature 1880-1940* topic.

|  |  |
|--|--|
| <p><b>What is the narrative perspective?</b></p>   | <p><b>Who has power in this text? What makes them powerful – are they older than the other characters? wealthier? socially superior?</b></p> |
| <p><b>What can you work out about the social class of the characters? Are they rich or poor? Do they work for a living?</b></p>  | <p><b>Where do the characters or their families come from? Have they arrived in the US via immigration? Are they people of colour?</b></p>   |
| <p><b>Are we in an urban space or a more quiet, rural setting? What conclusions can you draw from the setting?</b></p>   | <p><b>If set in a more rural setting, what is the relationship between the character(s) and the land?</b></p>                                |
| <p><b>How does this passage engage with the concept of the American Dream?</b></p>   | <p><b>What do you notice about the gender dynamics present? Does the author's perspective shed new light on this?</b></p>                    |
| <p><b>Where within the time period is this set? e.g. is it the late 1800s, early 1900s, late 1930s? Do you have a sense of a thriving economy or of deprivation? What implications might this have on the themes of the passage?</b></p> | <p><b>Does the passage engage with religious faith at all? If so, how does this affect the passage?</b></p>                                  |

# Biographical context

Biographical context can be useful in drawing together different areas of knowledge but we do offer a general warning about applying this in too broad a manner. Reading fictional work primarily through a biographical lens can often flatten nuance and can create distortions of authorial experience to fit the fictional narrative. We particularly offer caution regarding mistaking work as necessarily autobiographical or confessional (female writers tend to be particularly targeted with this approach.)

The two core authors of this topic are F. Scott Fitzgerald and John Steinbeck. Below we've offered a brief biography and links to sources about both authors.

## F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896-1940)

Fitzgerald was born in 1896 in Minnesota and brought up primarily in New York. In 1917, while a student at Princeton University, he fell in love with the 16-year-old Ginevra King, who became a model for Daisy Buchanan in *The Great Gatsby*. After being rejected by her, he dropped out of university to join the army, and met Zelda Sayre when he was stationed in Alabama. She refused to marry him because of his lack of wealth, but changed her mind when he achieved success on the publication of *This Side of Paradise* in 1920.

This novel together with his second, *The Beautiful and Damned* (1922), were very well received, and for a time Scott and Zelda enjoyed a wild 'Jazz Age' lifestyle as a result of his success; he published large numbers of short stories to sustain it. During this period Fitzgerald spent time in Europe where he made friends among other ex-patriate writers, sometimes dubbed the 'Lost Generation'; he became especially close to Ernest Hemingway.

Fitzgerald's third novel, *The Great Gatsby* (1925), was critically successful but a commercial failure. His marriage was troubled with his own heavy drinking and Zelda's increasingly severe mental health problems; she was diagnosed with schizophrenia in 1930 and hospitalized for much of the rest of her life (she died after her husband, in 1948). Fitzgerald published perhaps his most autobiographical work in 1934's *Tender is the Night* in 1934, which covered similar ground as Zelda's 1932 novel *Save Me the Waltz*. Fitzgerald later moved to Hollywood and attempted to support himself and his family as a screenwriter. He had struggled for years with alcoholism, and despite apparent success in giving up drink he died in 1940 at the age of 44 after a heart attack. Although he enjoyed a period of fame and success in the 1920s, his enduring reputation and popularity as a writer were only established after his death.

## Interviews with and essays by Fitzgerald

- [Selected letters](#) by Fitzgerald spanning between 1913 and 1940 have been transcribed and are available online.
- Moser, John C., '[That Sad Young Man](#)', 9<sup>th</sup> April 1926

## John Steinbeck (1902-1968)

Steinbeck was born in 1902 in California. He grew up as a member of the Episcopal Church but later distanced himself from his earlier religious views. He lived in a rural area and spent his summers doing farm work and working alongside immigrant labourers. He studied literature at Stanford University, leaving without a degree in 1925. In this period of his life he did odd jobs for money while trying to make a start as a writer. He married his first wife, Carol Henning, in 1930. He became close friends with Ed Ricketts, a marine biologist, learning a great deal from him concerning philosophy and biology; ecological themes are important in Steinbeck's work during the period of their friendship.

The Steinbecks' marriage broke up in 1941, resulting in a move away from the California coast and putting an end to his closeness with Ricketts. Steinbeck married again in 1942, to Gwyndolyn Conger; they had two sons, but the marriage ended in 1948. During the period of his second marriage he became World War II correspondent for the New York Herald Tribune in 1943 and was involved with the capture of Italian and German prisoners in the Mediterranean. His third marriage to Elaine Scott lasted until his death in 1968.

Steinbeck was a prolific writer, producing many works including sixteen novels, six non-fiction works and two collections of short stories; he also co-authored a book with Ed Ricketts called *Sea of Cortez* (1941), about a collecting expedition to the Gulf of California in 1940.

## Steinbeck interviews and biographies

- A new biography of Steinbeck was published in 2020, William Souder's *Mad at the World: A Life of John Steinbeck* offering a greater focus on Steinbeck's life and views on injustice
- ed. Fensch, Thomas, [Conversations with John Steinbeck](#) (University Press of Mississippi, 1988) is available online at the Internet Archive

## Suggested authors: biographical pointers

Please find below a range of sources for further biographical detail of these authors below. Where possible we have listed interviews, in the absence of these we've tried to signal letters or journals, as well as biographies or profile pieces about the suggested authors on this list:

### Henry James (1843-1916)

- ed. Edel, Leon, [Henry James: Selected Letters](#), (Harvard University Press, 1987)
- There have been several biographies of James over the years, not least Leon Edel's five volume approach written between 1953 and 1972. The abridged consolidation of Edel's work, [Henry James: A Life](#) (1985) and Fred Kaplan's [Imagination of a Genius \(1992\)](#) edition are available online from the Internet Archive.

### Mark Twain (1835-1910)

- Twain, whose given name was Samuel Clemens, has [his complete letters](#) available online from Project Gutenberg, as arranged by Albert Bigelow Paine.
- Churchwell, Sarah, '[Mark Twain: not an American but the American](#)', *The Guardian*, 30<sup>th</sup> October 2010
  - o The [first](#) and [second](#) volumes of the unexpurgated autobiography detailed in Churchwell's piece can be found online at the Internet Archive.

### Theodore Dreiser (1871-1945)

- Dreiser, Theodore, *Newspaper Days*, (1931).
  - o [A copy of a later edition](#) is available online at the Internet Archive

Wallace, Mike, '[Theodore Dreiser's New York](#)', *The Paris Review*, 26<sup>th</sup> October 2017

### Willa Cather (1873-1947)

- [A number of Cather's letters are transcribed](#) by the Willa Cather Archive team.
  - o In their previous iteration, they listed [Cather's letter to Fitzgerald](#) from April 1925, writing in response to [his praise for 'A Lost Lady'](#)
- [A number of interviews with Cather](#) have been excerpted from ed. Bohlke, L. Brent, *Willa Cather in Person: Interviews, Speeches, and Letters* (University of Nebraska Press, 1986) online

### Edith Wharton (1862-1937)

- Mead, Rebecca, '[The Age of Innocence](#)', *The New Yorker*, 22<sup>nd</sup> June 2009
- The Mount, the home Wharton designed, has a useful [overview section](#) of her life.
- There have been several biographies of Wharton over the years, not least Hermione Lee's 2008 edition. Both [R. W. B. Lewis' 1977 biography](#) and [Shari Benstock's No Gifts from Chance \(1994\)](#) are available online from the Internet Archive.

### Nella Larsen (1891-1964)

- Dean, Michelle, '[Passing Through](#)', *Lapham's Quarterly*, 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2015
- Hutchinson, George, [In Search of Nella Larsen: A Biography of the Color Line](#) (Harvard University Press, 2006)

## William Faulkner (1897-1962)

- Stein, Jean, '[William Faulkner, The Art of Fiction No. 12](#)', *The Paris Review* Issue 12 (Spring 1956)
- Cep, Casey, '[William Faulkner's Demons](#)', *The New Yorker*, 23<sup>rd</sup> November 2020

## Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961)

- Plimpton, George, '[Ernest Hemingway, The Art of Fiction No. 21](#)', *The Paris Review* Issue 18 (Spring 1958)
- Ross, Lillian, '[How do you like it now, gentlemen?](#)', *The New Yorker*, 6<sup>th</sup> May 1950
- [Hemingway's letter to Fitzgerald](#) from May 1934, after the latter asked for feedback on a draft of *Tender is the Night*

## Richard Wright (1908-1960)

- Wright, Richard, '[How "Bigger" Was Born](#)' in *Native Son and How 'Bigger' Was Born*, (US: Harper Perennial, 1993)
- Richard Wright wrote quite a lot of non-fiction, most famously an autobiography of his childhood in the South and early adulthood in Chicago. Despite envisioning them being published together, the initial publication focused only on the childhood section and published this as *Black Boy* (HarperCollins, 1945). The later sections were published as *American Hunger* in 1977, before being commonly brought together under the original title of *Black Boy* since the 1990s.
  - o [A copy of the original childhood focused \*Black Boy\*](#) is available from the Internet Archive

# Further sources

## Novel Reflections on the American Dream

[A series of interviews](#) were conducted by Michael Epstein for what would end up being part of PBS's *American Masters* series which aired in 2007. Across the documentary interviews with writers and historians, Epstein asks his interviewees to talk about the American dream through discussions of key American novels.

These are really fascinating resources that could be shared with students, for research projects or presentations, or just to develop their wider understanding and interpretations of these novels. We've detailed three of the interviews below but there are seven in total with videos and transcripts available.

- Gloria Naylor, an African American novelist best known for her novel *The Women of Brewster Place* (1983) was interviewed for the series. In her section, Naylor reflects on John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, Nella Larsen's *Passing* and, to a lesser extent, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, as well as other later novels like Ann Petry's *The Street*. Naylor talks about the ways in which the American Dream can be seen as an illusion and exclusionary, how it can be seen to reflect American valorisation of self-actualisation divorced from social contexts and support.
  - o Naylor, Gloria, '[Gloria Naylor, Novel Reflections on the American Dream](#)', *American Masters Digital Archive* (WNET), 28<sup>th</sup> June 2000
- Maureen Howard, a novelist and academic, reflects on Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* and Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Howard also discusses Wharton's own social position and context, depictions of American cities and American tragic conventions.
  - o Howard, Maureen, '[Maureen Howard, Novel Reflections on the American Dream](#)' *American Masters Digital Archive* (WNET), 30<sup>th</sup> June 2000
- Matthew Bruccoli, professor of English at the University of South Carolina and Fitzgerald scholar, reflects on both Dreiser and Fitzgerald's novels. In his interview, he offers some exploration of Dreiser's treatment of money, sex and race and the publishing context for both *Sister Carrie* and *The Great Gatsby*.
  - o Bruccoli, Matthew, '[Matthew Bruccoli, Novel Reflections on the American Dream](#)' *American Masters Digital Archive* (WNET), 5<sup>th</sup> July 2000.

## Cambridge University Press's The American Novel series

ed. Bruccoli, Matthew J., [New Essays on The Great Gatsby](#), (Cambridge University Press, 1985)

ed. Kinnamon, Kenneth, [New Essays on Native Son](#), (Cambridge University Press, 1990)

ed. Porte, Joel, [New Essays on The Portrait of a Lady](#), (Cambridge University Press, 1990)

ed. Wyatt, David, [New Essays on The Grapes of Wrath](#), (Cambridge University Press, 1990)

ed. Pizer, Donald, [New Essays on Sister Carrie](#), (Cambridge University Press, 1991)

ed. Polk, Noel, [New Essays on The Sound and the Fury](#), (Cambridge University Press, 1993)

## Additional sources

['African American literature: The late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries'](#), Encyclopaedia Britannica

Bradbury, Malcolm, *The Modern American Novel*, 1994

Davis, Angela Y., [Women, Race and Class](#), (Random House, 1981)

Ellison, Ralph, '[Recent Negro Fiction](#)', *New Masses*, 5<sup>th</sup> August 1941 p. 22 – 26

ed. Freedman, Jonathan, [The Cambridge Companion to Henry James](#), (Cambridge University Press, 1998)

Howe, Irving, '[Black Boys and Native Sons](#)', *DISSENT* (Autumn 1963)

Lawrence, D. H., *Studies in Classic American Literature*, (Thomas Seltzer Inc, 1923)

ed. Lutes, Jean M., and Travis, Jennifer, *Gender in American Literature and Culture*, (Cambridge University Press, 2021)

Minter, David L., [\*A Cultural History of the American Novel: Henry James to William Faulkner\*](#), (Cambridge University Press, 1994)

ed. Nowlin, Michael, *Richard Wright in Context* (Cambridge University Press, 2021)

Pepperdine Libraries, 'American Literature in Special Collections' has [Nineteenth Century](#) and [Twentieth Century](#) resources



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