

Chapter 6: American Literature since 1945 (1945 Present)

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6.1 LEARNING OUTCOMES

After completing this chapter, you should be able to:

- Identify Second Wave writers of the Southern Literary Renaissance
- Explain how the Second Wave of the Southern Literary Renaissance differed from the First Wave
- Describe the impact that World War II had on the Southern Literary Renaissance
- Identify selected writers and works of American literature since 1945
- Interpret, compare and contrast selected works of American literature since 1945
- Describe how selected works represent American culture of the 1940s, 1950s, 1960s, 1970s and beyond
- Explain how literary postmodernism relates to literary modernism
- Describe the postmodern style and sensibility of selected works of American literature since 1945

6.2 INTRODUCTION

Since the end of the Second World War to the present day, the people of the United States of America have witnessed the incredible economic and technological growth of their nation into a global cultural and military superpower. These years of growth also have often been times of radical cultural transformation, during which the nation reassessed its traditions. Americans in this period lived through times of war and times of peace, decades of cultural conformity and decades of social revolt. For the first two decades of this period, Americans lived in a racially segregated nation; they now live in a multicultural nation that has twice elected a black president. For much of this period, Americans lived in a world of ideologically warring superpowers poised on the brink of nuclear annihilation; they now live in a world intimately connected by massive computer networks and a complex global economy, yet one still riven by dangerous religious and economic disputes. In popular culture, Americans' tastes in music have moved from jazz and rock and roll to hip-hop and electronic music. In the visual arts, Americans have seen the explosive canvases of abstract expressionists such as Jackson Pollock become the Campbell's Soup cans of

pop artists such as Andy Warhol and then the video screens of cable television's MTV and multimedia artists on YouTube. Their art and entertainment have come to them increasingly through technologies, starting with film and radio, then television, and now the Internet. In the literature of this amazingly transformative era, we find a record of how the nation has known, questioned, and even redefined itself.

When the United States ended the Second World War by dropping atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the nation was well positioned to assume a role of global leadership. While the cities and factories of both its enemies Germany and Japan and its allies Britain and the Soviet Union were destroyed in the war, the continental U.S. was never attacked. The American industries that won the war quickly retooled to win the peace, selling cars, radios, and washing machines within an increasingly global economy and ushering in an era of unparalleled American prosperity. The United States government spent tens of billions of dollars in foreign aid to rebuild its former enemies Germany and Japan, ensuring that they would be both economic and military allies in the future. The **GI Bill** paid for an unprecedented number of young American men to attend colleges and buy homes, creating a huge professional middle class eager to work for the nation's mighty high-tech corporations and live in its swiftly growing new suburbs. The decade and a half following the Second World War is often called the age of conformity, as the nation's large, college-educated middle class embraced the values of the nuclear family and sought happiness, after years of desperate war, in their society's newfound abundance of consumer goods.

Yet the peace was short lived, and there was dissent at home. In the midst of this postwar era of prosperity, Allen Ginsberg composed his great poem "Howl," in which he lambasted the nation's conformist culture for destroying its best and brightest citizens. Authors of the Beat movement of the 1950s such as Ginsberg celebrated America's countercultures and sought to free literature from traditional formalism and align it more closely with the improvisatory musical solos of jazz, the spontaneous drips and splashes of abstract expressionist action painting, and the everyday utterances of the American street. Storytellers of the second wave of the Southern Renaissance resisted America's culture of conformity and embraced their distinctive regionality, with Georgia author Flannery O'Connor lamenting in her essay, "The Fiction Writer and His Country," that the traditional American South was "getting more and more like" the rest of the materialistic, money-hungry nation. Poets during this period, such as Theodore Roethke and Sylvia Plath, began sharing intimate, sometimes disturbing details from their lives in a newly confessional mode of poetry that showed how the nuclear family could be a source of stress as well

as stability, ultimately showing the nation how the personal situation of the writer could represent the politics of the nation as a whole.

On the world stage, the Soviet Union organized the Eastern European nations it had conquered during the Second World War into a political bloc dedicated to Russian-led state socialism under which the state owns all businesses and administers all social services as opposed to American-led free-market capitalism, under which private individuals own all businesses. The former allies found themselves competing for the hearts and minds of the world over the value of their respective social systems. When the Soviet Union tested its own atomic bomb in 1949, the U.S. and the Soviet Union entered into a conflict called the **Cold War**. The two enemies proceeded to build tens of thousands of nuclear weapons over the following decades to deter each from attacking the other, accumulating enough atomic bombs to destroy human civilization many times over. The U.S. committed itself to a policy of Soviet containment, checking the influence of the so-called red menace abroad through foreign aid and limited military action, and prosecuting American artists and activists with leftist sympathies at home through such venues as the House Un-American Activities Committee. Some of the authors in this chapter had their careers curtailed during this fearful period because of their political beliefs, as when poet William Carlos Williams was stripped of his consultancy to the Library of Congress in 1952 for once having written a poem titled "Russia."

In addition to grappling with the threats of nuclear war and the red menace, Americans at this time were also grappling with the homegrown injustice of racial segregation. Up until 1965, Americans in many states lived under **Jim Crow** laws that disenfranchised African-Americans, keeping black American citizens socially separate from and legally inferior to white citizens. The civil rights and black power movements of the 1950s and 60s, led by Dr. Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, increasingly showed the nation that the experience of its prosperous, college-educated white middle class was not the experience of all Americans. The often-violent struggle to desegregate America was televised across the nation, unifying the country within a new television culture in the very act of displaying its deep ideological divisions. The works in this chapter by Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, and Ralph Ellison present a good record of what life was like in segregated America and during the civil rights movement.

In 1963, American President John F. Kennedy was assassinated. In 1974, another American president, Richard M. Nixon, resigned from office in disgrace. The tumultuous decade in between these two events is known as the Sixties. During this decade, America was fighting a seemingly endless war of containment in Vietnam. Students on college campuses protested the war and the policies of their own government. Urban populations rioted against racism and economic

disparity. Artists and intellectuals radically reassessed America's prosperous postwar era as a culture of one-dimensional organization men trapped in skyscrapers and servile women trapped by what feminist critic Betty Friedan called the feminine mystique. Led by author-activists such as Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem, women in the 1960s and '70s launched a second wave of feminist political activity, demanding full social and economic equality with men. Poets such as Adrienne Rich embodied the radical politics of their era, composing feminist poems, such as the one by her included in this chapter.

America returned to a Cold War culture of conformity in the decade preceding the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Yet the changes the Sixties had wrought in the nation's culture were permanent. From the time of the civil rights movement to the present day, American writers have increasingly come to see the U.S. as being home to several different kinds of Americans—African-Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans, Straight Americans, Queer Americans—each with their own unique experience of life in America. The civil rights and feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s were followed by the gay rights and multicultural movements of the 1980s, 1990s, and early twenty-first century. Western culture itself became more welcoming of difference after the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War as the nations of Europe cast aside millennia of enmities and joined in a European Union, sharing a common currency, the Euro, and a common economic fate. While the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 illustrated how economically and technologically connected the world had become, they also drove home how socially and ideologically divided it remains in the early twenty-first century.

America's growing multicultural sensibility and tolerance of diversity has been both empowering and challenging, reflecting new kinds of political identity that often conflict with Americans' senses of who they are. Beholding the diversity within America, authors of the 1960s once worried about the "death of the novel." It no longer felt possible for a single story to represent the American experience as a whole. Back in 1949, Arthur Miller's salesman Willy Loman in his play, *Death of a Salesman*, could stand on stage as an American Everyman dreaming the American dream. Yet Willy's life is far from representative of every life in America, starting with the lives of every American woman and extending to every member of an American minority. American authors of the following decades began to represent America multiculturally as a nation of indigenous peoples and immigrants from other lands. The short stories by Alice Walker and Leslie Marmon Silko are good examples of multicultural literature. Silko draws specifically on her Native American heritage while Alice Walker shows us the tensions that arise as her characters negotiate an identity that is grounded in both Africa and America.

The changes that the nation has undergone since 1945 have often been disorienting, a disorientation that is reflected in Donald Barthleme's story, also found in this chapter, "The School," in which the reader struggles to make sense of all the odd and terrible things that happen in Barthleme's average American school. The United States has remained an economic and cultural global superpower since 1945, but the politics of both the nation and the world during this time have been radically in flux, seeing the rise and fall of global empires, the emergence of new social justice movements, and the creation of new senses of national identity. Science and technology, so important to winning the Second World War, have penetrated more and more parts of American society. The computer has been the most influential invention of the era, changing the way Americans both work and play. The media of the book, radio, and film have been joined by the new media of the television and computer screen, giving Americans since 1945 an overwhelming variety of often contradictory ways to know themselves, their fellow citizens, and their world. With so many media in which to see, know, and communicate with one another, Americans in the final decades of the twentieth century developed a growing sense of the "textuality" of experience, the recognition that their lives are increasingly lived through signs and images seen on life's many screens, that videos and computer simulations have become an indispensable part of, and perhaps have even taken the place of, their reality. This sensibility is reflected in the transition from literary modernism to Postmodernism during this period. You will read more about this transition later in this chapter. Postmodernist authors such as Barthleme playfully use all the experimental literary techniques developed by the modernists in the first half of the century to represent the many lives Americans live in the century's second half and beyond. The characters in Don DeLillo's 1985 postmodernist novel *White Noise* anticipate the twenty-first century's obsession with social media as they realize that the many photographs of "the most photographed barn in America" are more real than the actual barn being photographed. David Foster Wallace's "maximalist" essay "Consider the Lobster" likewise represents the information overload Americans experience in the twenty-first century, his many footnotes creating a hyperlinked, postmodern style of prose that reflects the superabundance of information available on the Internet.

American literature since 1945 has seen the rise of countercultural Beats and the confessional poets. It contains the voices of radical feminists, conservative regionalists, and proud multiculturalists. It presides over the reinvention of America as its modernist storytellers of one American experience now stand beside the postmodernist storytellers of many American experiences. In all these ways and more, the American writers who lived through the

extraordinary era since 1945 present us with an insightful record of what their nation and its people once were, of what they are, and of what they may become.

6.3 SOUTHERN LITERARY RENAISSANCE SECOND WAVE (1945-1965)

While the first wave of Southern writers were writing with an agenda, in reaction to H.L. Menken's claims that the South could not produce great art, the Post-1945 Southern writers came of age under the spell of the a group of writers studying at Vanderbilt University who named themselves the Agrarians (John Crow Ransom, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, Andrew Lytle, etc) as well as several commercially successful Southern writers such as William Faulkner. In turn, they internalized a story telling tradition that was already on-going. These Second Wave writers had concerns of their own, as the South, along with the rest of the World, entered the **Cold War**, in the post **World War II** period. Yet, while the South tried to keep pace with a changing world, Southern literature continued to produce some of the most innovative, critically acclaimed work of the time period. Eudora Welty's debut novel, *The Robber Bridegroom* (1942), gained national attention for her as a short story writer who had already won back-to-back O. Henry awards, including one for her well anthologized short story, "A Worn Path." Carson McCullers was the literary "wunderkind" who exploded onto the national spotlight at the age of twenty-three with her debut novel, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (1940). Flannery O'Connor emerged as the super star of the Iowa Writer's Workshop, winning multiple accolades, including two O. Henry Awards, as her short story "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" (1955) became widely anthologized. Doctor turned lawyer, Walker Percy's debut novel, *The Movie Goer* (1961), won the National Book Award for mixing theology, philosophy, and the Mardi Gras into one beautifully written novel. From Percy to Porter to Peter Taylor, the Southern Literary Renaissance remained strong well after 1945.

6.3.1 The Cold War and the Southern Literary Renaissance

America's war efforts bolstered the national economy, especially in the South, which is home to several military training bases. While the South still suffered from Jim Crow laws and antiquated racial politics, it did offer more progressive roles for women who found themselves taking professional jobs, filling positions vacated by men who had left for war. This shift became a major theme in Katherine Ann Porter's "Miranda" stories. Flannery O'Connor saw such role changes firsthand when she studied at Georgia College for Women where the WAVES (Women Accepted for Voluntary Emergency Services), a female naval reserve unit, were training. As the country continued to change drastically after World War II, the South tried to keep pace.

6.3.2 Economic Prosperity

The post World War II South was positioned for economic prosperity, as soldiers returned home to find more infrastructure and a trained workforce. The rise of the middle class also helped develop major Southern cities, such as Atlanta and Birmingham, into national prominence. The South had finally begun to embrace the shift from agricultural to industrial economy. With a growing middle and professional class, the South began to shake off the image of rural poverty with which it was associated in works such as Erskine Caldwell's *Tobacco Road* and *God's Little Acre* or the influence of Margaret Mitchell's **Gone with the Wind**.

6.3.3 The Civil Rights Movement in the south

Unfortunately, the South's prosperity during this time was marred by its bigotry and antiquated racial politics as many of the South's preeminent African-American authors, such as Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and Ralph Ellison, left the South to escape the antagonism and racism they encountered. As the segregationists dug in their heels, the Civil Rights movement became a major theme of the Southern Literary Renaissance. Although the South was growing, the legacy of racism—as the Civil Rights Movement gained national attention in the 1950s and 1960s—gave the region a national black eye, but also gave birth to the Civil Rights movement, the Black Power movement and the Black Arts movement. A strong literary tradition developed around these movements, giving rise to powerful writers such as Nikki Giovanni and Maya Angelou.

6.3.4 New Criticism and the Rise of the MFA program

One unexpected result of the Southern Literary Renaissance was the creation of the first Southern literary celebrities. This rise to prominence of Southern literary authors coincided with the return of thousands of soldiers entering college for the first time, courtesy of the GI Bill. Suddenly these soldiers were enrolling in creative writing classes, wanting to tell their own stories.

Around this time, the University of Iowa and Stanford University piloted the nation's very first graduate creative writing programs, offering a Masters of Fine Arts (MFA) degree. These creative writing programs, especially the Iowa Writers Workshop, were heavily influenced by the Southern literary celebrities. While Columbia University's writing program featured Thomas Wolfe, the early faculty at the Iowa Writers Workshop included Allen Tate and John Crowe Ransom, while Robert Penn Warren, a professor at Louisiana State University, was a featured

speaker on numerous occasions. The instruction at the Iowa Writers Workshop was based upon the textbooks *Understanding Poetry* and *Understanding Fiction*, which were co-written by Warren and Cleanth Brooks, a professor at LSU and co-founder of *The Southern Review*. Through their celebrity, Southern writers exerted national influence over these creative writing programs as well as the early classes of writers who enrolled in these creative writing programs, such as Flannery O'Connor who was a student at the Iowa Writers Workshop from 1945-1948. Additionally, many of the early creative writing textbooks and anthologies featured these Southern writers; for example, Caroline Gordon's *The House of Fiction* was extremely popular in creative writing programs. In fact, the second editions of both *Understanding Fiction* and *The House of Fiction* would feature work from Iowa alum, Flannery O'Connor. Thus, the Southern Literary Renaissance writers continued to exert influence on creative writing, with everyone from Caroline Gordon, Katherine Ann Porter, and even Peter Taylor becoming associated with these programs.

6.3.5 Innovation

Like their predecessors, from whom they learned, the Second Wave of the Southern Literary Renaissance featured writers continuing the legacy of reinvention. Flannery O'Connor's fiction was particularly noteworthy for its marriage of violence, humor, and religious themes, a mixture that amused and baffled readers. On the opposite end of the spectrum, Walker Percy's experiment with blending philosophy and fiction captivated a national audience, while Tennessee Williams revolutionized theater with his hits *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), both of which highlighted the complex sexual politics of the South while also capturing its dialect and storytelling tradition.

The Southern Literary Renaissance, much like the South itself, was a diverse movement with wide regional variations. Although it started as reactionary, with the work of the Fugitives, it grew in ways that the original authors of *I'll Take My Stand* could have never predicted, producing some of America's most famous writers and forever changing the way writing was viewed in the United States. After World War II, a new generation of Southern writers took up the cause. While not always responding to Menken, these writers continued the artistry, experimentation, and innovation of the previous generation.

6.4 TENNESSEE WILLIAMS (1911 - 1983)



Image 6.1 | Tennessee Williams, 1965

Photographer | Orlando Fernandez

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Born Thomas Lanier Williams III in Mississippi, Williams later adopted the pen name “Tennessee” after he began his writing career. Williams’s early life was fraught with family dysfunction. Williams’s father was a shoe salesman who struggled with alcoholism and at times exhibited violent tendencies. Williams’s mother, Edwina, covered for her husband’s often embarrassing behavior, attempting to maintain a veneer of Southern gentility. Williams and his two siblings, Dakin and Rose, weathered the family dynamics for a time, until Rose was diagnosed with schizophrenia. After years of treatment proved inadequate, Williams’s mother eventually approved a lobotomy for Rose, and after the procedure, the young woman was never the same, spending the rest of her life in an institution. Williams, who was very close to Rose, was tormented about his sister, and many of his plays dealt in some way with the trauma Rose endured. Williams attended college for a time as he developed his writing skills, attempting to garner attention for his work. It was not until the 1940s that Williams enjoyed his first success with *The Glass Menagerie*, which opened in Chicago and eventually made its way to New York and enjoyed a long run on Broadway. Williams followed that success in 1947 with *A Streetcar Named Desire*, one of his most enduring plays. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, Williams enjoyed a string of successes and saw a number of his plays adapted for film. By 1959, he had won multiple Pulitzer prizes for his work. In the 1930s, Williams had accepted his sexual orientation as a gay man but maintained a private life. In later years, Williams struggled with alcoholism and prescription drug addiction. After the painful loss of his partner of fourteen years, Frank Merlo, Williams faced serious depression, and over the last twenty years of his life, Williams struggled to reignite his writing career while his health and mental state deteriorated. In February 1983, Williams was found dead in a hotel room in New York after apparently choking on a bottle cap.

Tennessee Williams's style is often referred to as poetic realism or poetic expressionism. Expressionism is a part of the modernist movement in art and literature, where the expression of emotion or emotional experience takes precedence over the materialistic depiction of physical reality. Williams's plays typically contain stage directions that call not for a physical setting but for a creation of mood. Physical setting is often altered, augmented, or distorted in order to create a mood or to suggest an emotion. Music, lighting, and screen legends are used symbolically to create this kind of effect. In terms of characterization, Williams's plays often center on misfits or outcasts—outsiders who are often very sensitive and completely out of tune with contemporary times. Characters may be at odds with restrictive Southern mores, and they may struggle with sexual repression. In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Blanche DuBois is a complicated character who at times performs the role of Southern Belle, slightly down on her luck but steeped in Southern gentility with fine manners. At other times, the mask slips, and we see Blanche the sexually hungry woman, who gives a predatory stare at the young newspaper boy. At still other times, we see Blanche in all of her raw vulnerability, terrified of being “played out,” of having lost her youth and looks, of being utterly alone.

6.4.1 *A Street Car Named Desire*

Please click the link below to access this selection:

<http://www.metropolitancollege.com/Streetcar.pdf>

6.4.2 Reading and Review Questions

1. How is “desire” defined in the play?
2. Compare and contrast Blanche and Stella. What is the symbolic significance of their names?
3. Compare and contrast Blanche and Stanley; are they attracted to one another or repelled by one another? Why?
4. Select and analyze any of the following for symbolic significance in the play: the poker game, the streetcars and their names, Blanche's trunk, images of water, images of light, the flower seller, the newspaper boy, or Belle Reve.
5. Contrast Blanche with her “performance” of Blanche: what are the distinguishing features between the woman and the mask she sometimes creates for others? Does

she create different personas for different people in the play? Who is the “real” Blanche?

6. What is the connection between sex and death in the play?

6.5 JAMES DICKEY (1923 - 1997)

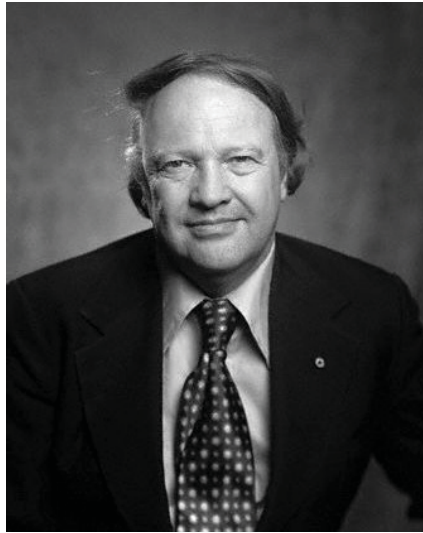


Image 6.1 | James Dickey, n.d.

Photographer | Unknown

Source | Wikipedia

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James Dickey, whose Byronic demeanor and athletic prowess earned him the nickname the “bare-chested bard,” was born in Atlanta, Georgia and grew up in Buckhead. Excelling at both football and track in high school, Dickey enrolled in Clemson A&M in 1942 to play football. He left Clemson after only one semester to enlist in the Army Air Corps, joining the 418th Night Fighter Squadron and flying over 100 missions in the Pacific Theater. Dickey discovered poetry during the war, spending his time between deadly night missions reading all the literature he could find in the base libraries where he was stationed. After the war, he attended Vanderbilt University as an English major, distinguishing himself in both academics and track. MA in hand, Dickey taught English at Rice Institute and the University of Florida, returning to the military during the **Korean War** to teach aviation for the Air Force. In the mid-1950s, Dickey suddenly quit teaching and moved to New York to work as a copywriter for an advertising agency, writing poetry only in the evenings. Growing to feel that “I was selling my soul to the devil during the day and trying to get it back at night,” as he told *Life* magazine in 1966, Dickey quit his lucrative

advertising job after six years. While unemployed and on welfare, he won a \$5000 Guggenheim Fellowship that allowed him to travel and focus his creative energies entirely on poetry. Dickey then returned to academia and dedicated himself for the rest of his life to writing and teaching, while continuing to play the sports he loved.

Dickey published nineteen volumes of poetry, three essay collections, two children's books, and three novels, including the best-selling novel *Deliverance* (1972), a thrilling tale set in north Georgia about four suburban Atlanta river rafters who find themselves in a fight for their lives against homicidal mountain men. Over the forty years of his writing career, Dickey continually sought new ways to give voice to intense, violent, and powerful experiences such as combat, hunting, and sports. He continually experimented with new poetic forms of his own invention, such as "open verse," "split lines," and "associational imagery," as well as new typographical arrangements of the printed page. Although Dickey's poetry is informed by both his wartime experience and love of the physical life, he does not usually reflect upon his own adventures in his work. Instead—and unlike his era's confessional poets, who reflect deeply upon personal experience—Dickey frequently writes in a narrative mode as an explorer of someone else's extreme situation. In this way, the narrators of his poems reflect the act of reading itself, imaginatively inhabiting the characters they observe and vicariously experiencing the life-and-death situations they describe. For example, in the poem "Drinking from a Helmet," one soldier experiences the thoughts of a recently deceased soldier by wearing his helmet. Likewise, in "Falling," a poem based on a real event, a third-person narrator enters the consciousness of a stewardess during her fatal plunge to earth after being thrown from the open door of an airplane. Not all of Dickey's poems are this dramatic, as evidenced by the early narrative poem included here, "Cherrylog Road." Yet even this poem about an illicit tryst is set in "the parking lot of the dead," its narrator musing more upon the past lives and adventures contained in the wrecked cars around him than about the girl he is soon to meet.

6.5.1 "Cherrylog Road"

Please click the link below to access this selection:

<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/171426>

6.5.2 Reading and Review Questions

1. The poem's narrator devotes much of the poem to describing the cars around him, noting their physical condition and wondering about their previous owners.

However, he never describes what Doris Holbrook looks like or tells us anything about her past. Why is this?

2. What do the histories that the narrator imagines are contained within the wrecked cars tell us about the narrator himself?
3. In stanzas 15 and 16, the narrator compares himself and Doris to a black snake and then to beetles, respectively. Closely read these stanzas and discuss the significance of the poem's comparisons of people to animals and bugs.

6.6 FLANNERY O'CONNOR (1925 - 1964)



Image 6.3 | Flannery O'Connor, 1947

Photographer | C. Cameron Macauley

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Mary Flannery O'Connor was born in Savannah, Georgia and lived there until 1938. An Orthodox Catholic family, the O'Connor family lived in Lafayette Square, a largely Catholic neighborhood of Savannah, mainly through the generosity of her second cousin, Kate Semmes (whom O'Connor would call "Cousin Katie"). In 1936, O'Connor's father, Edwin, was diagnosed with lupus and was hospitalized in Atlanta; his diagnosis would later force the family to leave Savannah. While Edwin sought treatment, both Regina and Flannery would often stay with family in Milledgeville.

In 1941, Edwin's death would imprint itself on O'Connor, who was close with her father. Both Flannery and her mother, Regina, subsequently moved to live at Andalusia, the maternal family farm in Milledgeville. After high school, O'Connor enrolled in Georgia College for Women (now Georgia College) in Milledgeville, where she completed a degree in English and Sociology. In college, O'Connor was active with both the literary magazine, *The Corinthian*, and the yearbook, *The Spectrum*. After college, O'Connor enrolled in journalism school at the University of Iowa but, once there, enrolled in the Iowa Writer's Workshop, where she was able to work with many of the most influential writers of her time.

At the Writer's Workshop, O'Connor established herself as one of their most promising writers, winning a book contract, as well as a prestigious Yaddo fellowship at the Yaddo Writers Colony in New York. However, after being diagnosed with lupus in 1951, Flannery O'Connor returned to Andalusia, where she remained. At the age of twenty-five, she published her first novel, *Wise Blood* (1952) and followed it up with her first collection of short stories, *A Good Man is Hard to Find and Other Stories* (1955). Her second published novel, *The Violent Bear It Away* (1960), was nominated for a **National Book Award**. Up until her death from lupus, at the young age of thirty-nine, she was working on her second collection of stories, *Everything That Rises Must Converge* (1965). In 1971, O'Connor's friend and literary executor, Sally Fitzgerald, helped publish *The Complete Stories of Flannery O'Connor* which won the National Book Award and was later awarded the Reader's Choice Best of the National Book Award (2010).

O'Connor's fiction is famous for its **Southern gothic** settings and her use of dark humor. Other themes in her fiction include the following: her relationship with her mother, life at Andalusia, and her Orthodox Catholicism. "A Good Man is Hard to Find" is O'Connor's most anthologized story and one of her most violent. The story follows a family of six that, while on vacation to Florida, encounter the Misfit, a pensive, yet troubled serial killer, and one of O'Connor's most famous characters. The Misfit states that his troubles center on Christ's claims of resurrecting the dead. In "Good Country People," Joy-Hulga, a philosophy Ph.D. with a wooden leg, tries to seduce Manly Pointer, a naïve traveling bible salesman.

6.6.1 "A Good Man is Hard to Find"

Please click the link below to access this selection:

<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~drbr/goodman.html>

6.6.2 "Good Country People"

Please click the link below to access this selection:

<http://faculty.weber.edu/Jyoung/English%206710/Good%20Country%20People.pdf>

6.6.3 Reading and Review Questions

1. What do these two stories, “A Good Man is Hard to Find” and “Good Country People,” have in common?
2. What does the Misfit mean with his final line, “She would have been a good woman. . . if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life”?

6.7 POSTMODERNISM

Postmodernism is difficult to define. Don DeLillo is recognized as one of America’s premier postmodernist novelists, yet he rejects the term entirely. “If I had to classify myself,” he explains in a 2010 interview in the *Saint Louis Beacon*, “it would be in the long line of modernists, from James Joyce through William Faulkner and so on. That has always been my model.” Literally, the term postmodernism refers to culture that comes after Modernism, referring specifically to works of art created in the decades following the 1950s. The term’s most precise definition comes from architecture, where it refers to a contemporary style of building that rejects the austerity and minimalism of modernist architecture’s glass boxes and towers; postmodernist architects retain the functionalist core of the modernist building but then decorate their boxes and towers with playful colors, forms, and ornaments that reference disparate historical eras. Indeed, play—with media and materials, and with forms, styles, and content—is one of the chief characteristics of postmodernist art.

While postmodernist architects play with the material of their buildings, postmodernist writers play with the material that their poems and stories are made of, namely language and the book. Postmodernist writers freely use all the challenging experimental literary techniques developed by the modernists earlier in the twentieth century as well as new, even more experimental techniques of their own invention. In fiction, many postmodernist authors adopt the self-referential style of “**metafiction**,” a story that is just as much about the process of telling a story as it is about describing characters and events. Donald Barthelme’s postmodernist short story, “The School,” contains metafictional elements that comment on the process of storytelling and meaning-making, as when the narrator describes how the “lesson plan called for tropical fish input” even though all the students in the schoolroom knew the fish would soon die. Who is telling this story? Barthelme? The unnamed narrator? The lesson plan? The stories that make up history

itself are often a playground for postmodernist authors, as they take material found in history books and weave it into new tales that reveal secret histories and dimly perceived conspiracies. David Foster Wallace's essay, "Consider the Lobster," is a good example of the narrative excess found in postmodern literature. In this essay written for *Gourmet* magazine, Wallace uses his visit to the Maine Lobster Festival to tell a history of the lobster since the Jurassic period that eventually turns against the organizers of the festival themselves, who may or may not be covering up the truth about how much lobsters suffer in their cooking pots. The form of the essay cannot even contain Wallace's ideas, which spill over into twenty excessively long footnotes, many of which are little essays in themselves. In addition to playing with the form of literature and the notion of authorship, postmodernist writers also often play with popular sub-genres such as the detective story, horror, and science fiction. For example, in her poem "Diving into the Wreck," Adrienne Rich evokes both the detective story and science fiction as she imagines a futuristic diver visiting a deep sea wreck in order to solve the mystery of why literature and history have been mostly about men and not women.

Not all works of postmodernist literature are stylistically experimental or playful. Rather, their authors explore the meaning and value of postmodernity as a cultural condition. Several philosophers and literary critics—many of whose names have become synonymous with postmodernism itself—have helped us understand what the postmodern condition may be. "Poststructuralist" philosophers such as Jacques Derrida and Jean Baudrillard have argued that words and texts do not reflect the world but instead exist as their own self-referential systems, containing and even creating the world they describe. When we perceive the world, Derrida's philosophy of "deconstruction" claims, we see not things but "signs" that can be understood only through their relation to other signs. "There is no outside the text," Derrida famously claimed in his book *Of Grammatology* (1967). In this way, words and books and texts are powerful things, for in them our world itself is created—an insight that many postmodernist creative writers share. Baudrillard, in turn, argues in his book, *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), that the real world has been filled up with and even replaced by simulations that we now treat as reality: simulacra. These postmodern sensibilities are reflected in both Allen Ginsberg's poem, "A Supermarket in California," and our selection from DeLillo's *White Noise*. In Ginsberg's poem, food has become "brilliant stacks of cans" knowable only by their similarity to each other. The "neon fruit supermarket" is not even a simulation of a real farm but instead is a simulacra full of families who have probably never even seen a farm. In DeLillo's novel, we find the insight that the collected photographs of "the most photographed barn in America" are more real than the physical barn being photographed. Nobody knows why this particular barn is the most photographed barn in

America. The barn is famous simply because it is a much-copied text, valued more as a sign in relation to other signs (all those photos of the same thing) than as a thing in itself with a specific history and a particular use. In his book *Postmodernism* (1991), the leftist critic Frederic Jameson chastises postmodernism for being the “cultural logic of late capitalism,” which for him is a culture that erases the real meanings and relations of things such as the most photographed barn in America, replacing true history with nostalgic simulacra.

The culture of postmodernism in general exhibits a skepticism towards the grand truth claims and unifying narratives that have organized culture since the time of the Enlightenment. In postmodern culture, history becomes a field of competing histories and the self becomes a hybrid being with multiple, partial identities. In his provocative study, *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), the philosopher Jean Francois Lyotard argues that what defines the present postmodern historical era is the collapse of “grand narratives” that explain all experience, faiths, and truths, such as those found in science, politics, and religion; in place of all-explaining master narratives, he argues, we now know the world through smaller micro-narratives that don’t all fit together into a greater coherent whole. These insights are thoroughly explored in the confessional, feminist, and multicultural American literature of this era, whose authors write from their subjective points of view rather than presuming to represent the sum total of all American experiences, and whose works show us that American history has been far from the same experience for all Americans. For example, both Sylvia Plath and Theodore Roethke have poems about their fathers, but their appreciation of their respective fathers is shaped by both their genders and their own personal histories. Roethke feels a kinship with his father. Plath, however, sees her father as an enemy. The Native American author Leslie Marmon Silko tells her story specifically from the point of view of a member of the Laguna Pueblo tribe, whose members use old stories about the Yellow Woman and the ka’tsina spirit to understand their tribe’s relationship to the rest of America. In the works of African-American literature in this section, we find similar explorations of cultural identity. James Baldwin uses the African-American music of the blues and jazz to describe the relationship between the two brothers in his story, “Sonny’s Blues.” Ralph Ellison, in the first chapter from his novel *Invisible Man* (1952), writes about the experience of attending a segregated school that keeps black Americans separate from white Americans. Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, in their stories, explore the hybrid nature of African-American identity itself, showing us the tensions that arise when one’s identity is both American and black.

The varied, playful, experimental literature of postmodernism, the critic Brian McHale helpfully observes in his book *Constructing Postmodernism* (1993), presents readers not with many ways to know our one world but instead with many knowable worlds created within many

disparate works in many different ways. Modernist authors all strove to devise new techniques with which to accurately represent the world, McHale observes. Postmodernist authors, however, are no longer concerned with representing one knowable world but instead with creating many literary worlds that represent a diversity of experiences. Thus, much as the American literature of the contemporary era presents us with a record of how the nation has known, questioned, and even redefined itself, so too does the literature of postmodernism present us with a record of how writers have known, questioned, and even redefined what literature is.

6.8 THEODORE ROETHKE (1908 - 1963)



Image 6.4 | Theodore Roethke, 1959

Photographer | Imogen Cunningham

Source | Wikipedia

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Theodore Roethke is one of the most influential poets of the postmodern era. A student of the Modernists, who ultimately outgrew their poetry, Roethke's world is filled with contrasting images of nature and industry that create a sense of hope that distinguishes him from the Modernists, and a sense of insecurity that seems aptly suited to the middle years of the twentieth century. The winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry and two National Book Awards, Roethke is frequently remembered as a teacher, and the work of his own students often obscured the work of the master. The centenary of Roethke's birth in 2008, however, brought renewed attention to his poetic career.

Roethke's earliest works of poetry are restrained and spare, as the last lines of "Cuttings" (1948) demonstrate:

One nub of growth
Nudges a sand-crumb loose,
Pokes through a musty sheath
Its pale tendrilous horn. (5-8)

Even in these short lines, however, Roethke's gift for the lyric is clearly visible with the repeated opening sounds of "nub" and "nudges" pushing the reader to the end of the poem. At the same time, the sounds and rhythms of Roethke's poems, with their short lines and broken rhythms, evoke images of constraint and hesitation.

The selection from Roethke included here, "My Papa's Waltz," also from 1948, takes us from the world of hothouses into the hot and enclosed houses of American life. Much like the young plants struggling to grow in "Cuttings," the young boy in "My Papa's Waltz" struggles to grow in his home environment. Arranged in broken three-quarter time, "My Papa's Waltz" evokes contrasting images of playful roughhousing and domestic abuse. These contrasting images often lead to heated discussions among readers who are divided by their interpretations of this poem as one of joyous abandon and one of repeated brutality. Just what is the nature of this waltz that the boy and his father engage in, and how can it be wondrous if the mother's gaze is so disapproving? That Roethke's poetry invites such disparate responses is both a testament to his craftsmanship and a reaction to his deliberate ambiguity. Like the other postmodern poets in this section, Roethke's poems reveal the many shadows of modern life.

6.8.1 "My Papa's Waltz"

Please click the link below to access this selection:

<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/172103>

6.8.2 Reading and Review Questions

1. Describe the scene in the kitchen. Is this a happy occasion or is there a darker meaning here?
2. Describe the speaker's attitude toward the mother and the father.
3. What does the poem suggest about a father's responsibilities?

6.9 RALPH ELLISON (1914 - 1994)

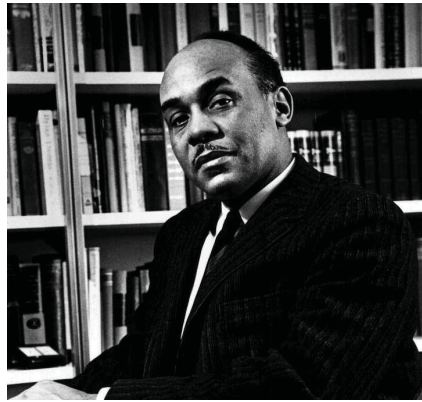


Image 6.5 | Ralph Ellison, 1961

Photographer | Houghton Mifflin

Source | Wikimedia Commons

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Ralph Waldo Ellison was born in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Ellison's father, Lewis, a manual laborer who delivered ice and coal, was an avid reader who named his son after Ralph Waldo Emerson and who hoped that his son would grow up to be a poet. Unfortunately he died of a work-related accident when Ellison was three, which left the two brothers, Robert and Herbert, to be raised by their single mother, Ida. The absence of his father would remain a recurring theme in Ellison's work.

As a young man, Ellison was interested in arts and culture, specifically, music. In 1933, he enrolled at the Tuskegee Institute, a historically black college which offered one of the nation's top programs in music. During his time at Tuskegee, Ellison gained a reputation for spending long hours in the library, reading heavily from several Modernist writers. Ellison cites T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* as a major influence in his life, inspiring him to be a writer. After college, Ellison moved to New York, where he met influential artist Romare Bearden as well as writer Richard Wright, both of whom were important influences on Ellison's life. During this time in New York, Ellison began to publish short stories, essays, and book reviews. In 1952, Ellison published his debut novel, *The Invisible Man*, a critical best seller which won the National Book Award. The novel vaulted him into the international spotlight as a writer, a position that he did not always embrace. *The Invisible Man* describes how the protagonist (who is never named and is, hence, "invisible") experiences various incidents of racism throughout his life after moving from the South to New York. The novel, Ellison's only one published during his lifetime, has remained one of the most famous and most influential novels in American literature. He spent the remainder of his life working on a follow-up novel. In 1967, he claimed to be near completion of

this novel when a house fire consumed his drafts. After his death, his posthumous follow-up was published under the title *Juneteenth* (1999); later a longer version of this novel was published under the title *Three Days Before the Shooting* (2010).

Although he never published a second novel in his lifetime, he did publish several essays, including essays about his lifelong love of music. His essay collection *Shadow and Act* (1964) was named one of the top 100 best non-fiction books of the twentieth century. One of the common themes of Ellison's work, both in fiction and non-fiction, was the idea of cultural ancestry—the idea that our cultural ancestors could be as influential as our biological ancestors. “Battle Royale,” the opening chapter of *The Invisible Man*, describes the protagonist's humiliating experience accepting a scholarship from a local civic organization. Although it is the introductory chapter, it has been highly anthologized as a short story.

6.9.1 Selection from *Invisible Man*

Chapter 1

Please click the link below to access this selection:

http://bpi.edu/ourpages/auto/2010/5/11/36901472/Ralph%20Ellison%20-%20Invisible%20Man%20v3_0.pdf

6.9.2 Reading and Review Questions

1. What is the significance of the protagonist's dream? What does his grandfather's appearance symbolize?
2. Why do you think the protagonist still gives his speech even after he's been humiliated?

6.10 JAMES BALDWIN (1924 - 1987)

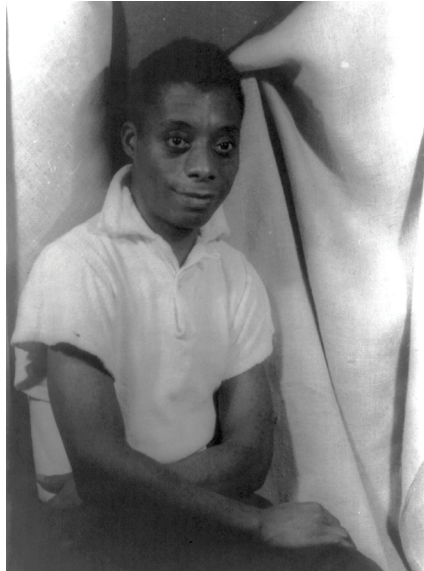


Image 6.6 | James Baldwin, 1955

Photographer | [Carl Van Vechten](#)

Source | [Wikimedia Commons](#)

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James Baldwin was born in Harlem, the oldest of nine children. Although he did not know his biological father, Baldwin's rocky relationship with his stepfather, a lay preacher who shared his name of James Baldwin, was a major influence in both Baldwin's writings and life. At the age of fourteen, a young Baldwin tried to follow in his stepfather's footsteps as a preacher, but his interest was short lived. In high school, Baldwin joined the school's literary magazine and began making trips to Greenwich Village. These trips only further sparked his interests in the arts and befriended many professional artists, including Beauford Delaney, an African-American painter who found fame during the Harlem Renaissance. As he recounts in his essay, "Notes on a Native Son," Baldwin's stepfather died in 1943 and was buried on Baldwin's nineteenth birthday, which was, subsequently, both the day his youngest brother was born as well as the day of the Harlem Riot.

In 1944, after the death of his stepfather, Baldwin moved to Greenwich Village, to focus on becoming a writer. It was here that Baldwin found an artistic community, forming friendships with artists such as Marlon Brando and his literary hero, Richard Wright. With Wright's help, Baldwin was awarded the Eugene Saxton fellowship (1945). Baldwin began to publish essays in influential magazines, such as *The Nation* and *Partisan Review*; however, in 1948, due to his disillusionment as a black, gay man in America, Baldwin followed in the path of other expatriates, including Wright, by moving to Paris. Although he would live in both Switzerland and Turkey, Baldwin eventually settled in Saint-Paul de Vence, South of France.

Baldwin's first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), was a major critical and commercial success. Despite being fiction, the biographical similarities in the novel about a young man, John Grimes—who questions the hypocrisy of the church, his own religious upbringing, his own sexuality, and his frustrations with being an African-American—were quite transparent. In 1955, he released his first collection of essays, the influential *Notes on a Native Son*, but it was his follow up novel, *Giovanni's Room* (1956), which was the subject of international controversy for its homoerotic content. The novel follows David who, after his girlfriend leaves him, has an affair with an Italian bartender, Giovanni.

The debut of Baldwin's book of essays *The Fire Next Time* (1963) only further cemented his reputation as one of the most famous and influential American writers of the twentieth century. Baldwin, despite living in France, was an extremely influential figure during the American Civil Rights movement, aligning himself with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), making several trips to the American South, working with figures such as Martin Luther King Jr. In 1963, he was featured on the cover of *Time* magazine for his work on the Civil Rights movement.

In his famous short story, "Sonny's Blues," Baldwin deals with the conflict between two brothers, one a math teacher and the other, Sonny, a musician recently released from jail. Throughout the story, it becomes clear that the two brothers do not know each other very well and that, although Sonny's troubles are **explicit**, the narrator's troubles are more **implicit**.

6.10.1 "Sonny's Blues"

Please click the link below to access this selection:

<http://swcta.net/moore/files/2012/02/sonnysblues.pdf>

6.10.2 Reading and Review Questions

1. The story describes a Cain and Abel-type relationship between the narrator and his brother. Can you find any other biblical allusions in the story?
2. To what does the title, "Sonny's Blues," refer? How is Sonny misrepresented by his brother? Why does his brother show up at the concert at the end of the story?
3. What do you see as the central theme of this story—addiction? Reconciliation? Individuality?

6.11 ALLEN GINSBERG (1926 - 1997)

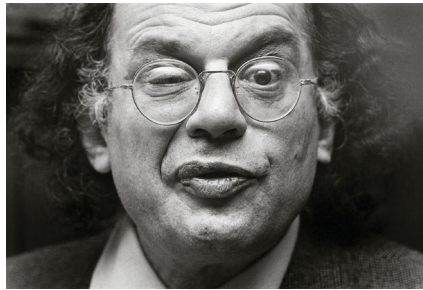


Image 6.7 | Allen Ginsberg, 1979

Photographer | Michiel Hendryckx

Source | Wikimedia Commons

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Ever since he read his groundbreaking poem “Howl” in 1954 to a shocked and enthralled audience at the Six Gallery in San Francisco, Allen Ginsberg has been the poetic voice of America’s counterculture. Ginsberg grew up in Patterson, New Jersey and attended Columbia University in New York City, where he met fellow authors Jack Kerouac (author of *On the Road* published in 1957) and William S. Burroughs (author of *Naked Lunch* published in 1959). Although a distinguished student, Ginsberg was temporarily expelled from Columbia for profanity and later spent eight months in a mental institution after pleading insanity when caught storing stolen goods for a drug addict friend. Upon his release, he was befriended by the poet William Carlos Williams, who recognized in Ginsberg a singular talent. After graduating from Columbia and supporting himself with a series of menial jobs in Harlem, Ginsberg moved to San Francisco in 1953 and began a successful, if brief, career as a market researcher. Yet his true calling remained poetry; he was soon fired from his job and, while on unemployment, wrote the poem that would make his reputation as a major American poet: the explosive, furious “Howl,” whose opening lines famously read, “I have seen the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked, / dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix, / angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the machine of night...” In San Francisco, Ginsberg found a welcoming community of poets centered around Lawrence Ferlinghetti’s City Lights Bookshop. In 1956, **City Lights Books** published Ginsberg’s first collection, *Howl and Other Poems* (which includes the poem selected here, “A Supermarket in California”) only to have the book seized and prosecuted by U.S. Customs for its allegedly indecent depiction of sexuality. From that point on, in numerous volumes of poetry as well as direct political actions from sit-ins to Congressional testimonies, Ginsberg became a singularly oppositional voice in American culture, howling against conformity and war,

championing environmentalism and gay rights, and finding beauty in all that American society has beaten down.

Ginsberg's *Howl and Other Poems* and his friend Jack Kerouac's novel *On the Road* (a *roman à clef* in which the leftist Ginsberg is the character "Carlo Marx") are the two definitive works of **Beat literature**, depicting the countercultural lives of their artists in an improvisatory, spontaneous style akin to jazz music. In 1948, while still living in Harlem, Ginsberg experienced a days-long **cosmic vision** in which he beheld the beauty of all divine creation and heard the godly voice of British romantic poet William Blake in the sky reciting his *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1798). Inspired by this vision and writing under the mentorship of William Carlos Williams, Ginsberg began crafting the poetic style for which he is now known: long, free Whitmanesque lines that find their rhythms in everyday American speech and contain the shockingly personal confessions of the poet himself on topics ranging from his mother's mental illness to his own open homosexuality. For Ginsberg, the American experience is often one of oppression and loss; Ginsberg's poetic mission, accordingly, is to recover the beauty of those people and things America herself has cast aside. In the poem "A Supermarket in California" included here, Ginsberg imagines walking with his poetic ancestor Walt Whitman through a modern-day supermarket, showing the great American romantic what his beautiful nation has become.

6.11.1 "Supermarket in California"

Please click the link below to access this selection:

http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/g_l/ginsberg/onlinepoems.htm

6.11.2 Reading and Review Questions

1. Making reference to the imagery in Ginsberg's poem, describe the America Walt Whitman finds in a mid-twentieth-century American supermarket.
2. Why does Ginsberg "feel absurd" when dreaming of his "odyssey in the supermarket" with Whitman?
3. Whitman asks three questions while in the supermarket: "Who killed the pork chops? What price bananas? Are you my Angel?" Imagine going into Publix, Kroger, or Ingles and asking these same three questions. How would the staff in the produce section or behind the meat counter respond? Could they even answer all three questions? And what do their responses tell us about the kinds of thought

that are encouraged in modern consumer America—and the kinds of thought that are not?

6.12 ADRIENNE RICH (1929 - 2012)



Image 6.8 | Adrienne Rich, 1980

Photographer | K. Kendall

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Adrienne Rich is one of the most important poets and feminists of the middle to late twentieth century. Taken together, the twenty-five collections of poetry and numerous essays she published in her lifetime are a powerful literary expression of this period's radical politics. Born in Baltimore, Maryland, Rich was encouraged to write poetry at an early age by her father, a pathologist at Johns Hopkins Medical School with a passion for English verse. She distinguished herself as a poet early in life, publishing her first book of poems, *A Change of World*, in 1951 while still a senior at Radcliffe College. The renowned poet W. H. Auden selected Rich's work for publication in the prestigious Yale Younger Poets Series based on what he perceived as the delicacy and restraint of her style. In 1952, Rich won her first of two coveted Guggenheim Fellowships, which funded a year-long trip to England and Italy. In 1953, she married an

economics professor from Harvard, giving birth to three children before the end of the decade. In this formative decade, Rich faced a dilemma still familiar to women today: how to maintain her career while shouldering full responsibility for her children and home. In the volumes of poetry she published in the early 1960s, Rich turns an increasingly critical eye on an American society that subordinates women to the will of men and that asks only women to choose between family and career. Rich's delicate and restrained poetry became radicalized over the course of the 1960s as she realized that her personal situation was also political, an expression of social forces and institutions that the poet herself could change. From then on, as she writes in her 1968 poem "Implosions," "I wanted to choose words that even you/ would have to be changed by."

From the 1960s until she published her final collection in 2010, Rich used poetry to criticize war, sexism, and environmental destruction and to imagine a world free of gender divisions and male domination. Beginning in the 1970s, Rich became an outspoken advocate for lesbian rights in her poetry as well. As she describes in her book *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976), over the course of the 1960s Rich came to realize that she had been living as a "suppressed lesbian" her entire life. She separated from her husband in 1970 and entered into a relationship with the novelist Michelle Cliff in 1974, with whom she remained partners until her death 2012. Rich's National Book Award winning collection of 1973, *Diving into the Wreck*, exemplifies her poetry of political conviction. Published during the second wave feminist movement, the poems in this volume describe women as a vast global sisterhood that has been written out of history. Rich optimistically imagines that this oppressive situation can change as society itself changes, in part through the force of the poet's voice. The history of Western civilization, as Rich writes in the closing lines of the titular poem presented here, "Diving into the Wreck," is "a book of myths / in which / our names do not appear." The wreck in this poem is the wreck of western civilization itself, containing the ruins of both patriarchy and poetry. The poem's narrator is a person unimaginable in traditional Western society: someone who identifies with both genders at once and who transforms the decline of one civilization into the art of its successor. This hybrid narrator takes the reader on a dramatic journey into this dangerous wreck so that the reader, too, can imagine the end of a divisive civilization in which men dominate women.

6.12.1 "Diving into the Wreck"

Please click the link below to access this selection:

<https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/diving-wreck>

6.12.2 Reading and Review Questions

1. The book of myths is a metaphor for all the writings of Western civilization. Why does the poem's narrator "first [have] to read the books of myths" before making this metaphoric dive into the wreck of Western civilization?
2. In the final stanza, Rich contradictorily writes that the narrator finds her way "by cowardice or courage . . . back to this scene." If cowardice, then what fear is she succumbing to? If courage, then what fear is she facing?
3. Rich's narrator worries in stanza five that "it is easy to forget / what I came for." What does the narrator come to the wreck for? Why is it so easy to forget this goal?

6.13 TONI MORRISON (1931 - 2019)



Image 6.9 | Toni Morrison, 2008

Photographer | Angela Radulescu

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The first African-American to win a Nobel Prize for Literature, Toni Morrison is one of the most important American authors of the past century. In the eleven exquisitely crafted novels she has published to date, Morrison combines folk and postmodernist storytelling techniques to explore what it means to be both black and a woman in America. Morrison was born in Loraine, Ohio, and earned a Bachelor's degree in English from Howard University and a Master's Degree from Cornell University. Although she began writing creative fiction at Howard, Morrison worked primarily as a college professor in the decade following her graduation from Cornell, teaching at Texas Southern University and then at Howard. In 1964, Morrison divorced the husband she met at Howard, moved to New York, and worked as a senior editor for Random House publishers,

where she championed the writing of several notable African-American authors including Angela Davis and Toni Cade Bambara. Morrison continued to write and teach at colleges while working at Random House, publishing her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, in 1970. Since then she has taught at numerous institutions, including schools in the New York state university system, Yale, Bard, and finally Princeton, where she is currently an emerita professor. In addition to working as an editor, novelist, and professor, Morrison is also a prolific essayist and public intellectual, publishing editorials in venues such as *The New York Times* and appearing on popular TV programs such as *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*. She has also written three children's books with her son, Slade Morrison, and the libretto for an opera based on the life of the American slave Margaret Garner, who is also the inspiration for her Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *Beloved* (1987).

Morrison describes the postmodernist literary technique she has developed in her novels as that of “enchantment,” a blending of historical realism with the myths and supernatural tales she learned as a child. “That’s the way the world was for me and for the black people I knew,” she tells Christina Davis in a 1986 interview in *Conversations with Toni Morrison*. “There was this other knowledge or perception, always discredited but nevertheless there, which informed their sensibilities and clarified their activities...they had some sweet, intimate connection with things that were not empirically verifiable.” Examples of enchantment abound in Morrison’s work. In her novel *Song of Solomon* (1977), a story of a man coming to terms with his African-American identity, one character gives birth to herself—and thus does not have a navel—while another learns to fly as legendary African tribesmen once did. In *Tar Baby* (1981), a novel about people who trap themselves in self-deceptions, Morrison structures her tale around the African-American fable of the trickster rabbit who gets caught by a deceptive figure made out of tar. In *Beloved*, a powerful novel about the legacy of slavery, the ghost of a slain baby haunts the home of an escaped slave. The short story “Recitatif” included here, originally published in Amiri and Amina Baraka’s anthology *Confirmation* (1983), is the only short story that Morrison ever published. While it does not directly reference the supernatural, “Recitatif” features other postmodernist techniques common to Morrison’s work, from its estranging opening lines to the historical revisionism that the two central characters, Twyla and Roberta, engage in over the story’s course.

6.13.1 “Recitatif”

Please click the link below to access this selection:

http://www.mychandlerschools.org/cms/lib6/AZ01001175/Centricity/Domain/1073/Morrison_recitatifessay.doc.pdf

6.13.2 Reading and Review Questions

1. Look up the meaning of the word “Recitatif.” Discuss why Morrison chose this term for her story’s title.
2. Twyla and Roberta are inseparable friends at St. Bonny’s. Why don’t Twyla and Roberta stay friends over the course of their lives?
3. Discuss why Twyla and Roberta have different memories of—and tell different stories about—Maggie.

6.14 DONALD BARTHELME (1931 - 1989)

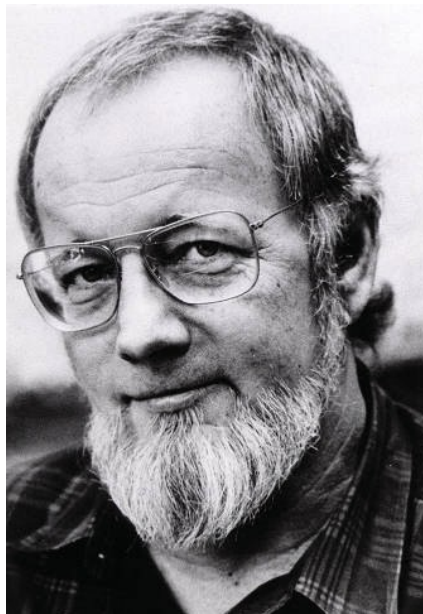


Image 6.10 | Donald Barthelme, n.d.

Publisher | University of Houston

Source | Wikimedia Commons

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Donald Barthelme was born in Philadelphia, but grew up in Houston, Texas, where his father was a professor of architecture at the University of Houston. From an early age, Barthelme showed an interest in writing, and in high school he won a Scholastic Writing Award, given to young writers. Yet, Barthelme had a strained relationship with his father, who disagreed with his choice of literature and whom Barthelme believed was too demanding and controlling. Despite

this rocky relationship, Barthelme attended the University of Houston, where his father worked, and studied journalism. As a student, Barthelme began writing for the *Houston Post*. In 1953, he was drafted into service for the U.S. Army, but arrived in Korea at the very end of the Korean War; thus, he was never in combat. When Barthelme returned to the states, he continued writing for the *Houston Post* and returned to the University of Houston, this time studying philosophy, although he never earned a degree.

Barthelme's literary output is most known for his short stories, with his Postmodern fiction being entirely unique. Indeed, he is considered a pioneer of **flash fiction**. Barthelme's experimental short stories avoid many of the common traits of a story, with their elements of plot or a linear narrative by instead experimenting with just about every constitutive element. Furthermore, his fiction was highly influenced by his own interest in philosophy, which gave his work an element of **gravitas**.

In 1961, Barthelme became the director of the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston; in the same year, he published his first short story in *The New Yorker*. Soon after, he moved to New York to edit a journal, *Locomotion*, and would go on to publish several short stories in *The New Yorker* magazine. In 1964, he published his first collection of short stories, *Come Back, Dr. Caligiri*, but it was his 1968 book of short stories, *Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts*, featuring his famous work, "The Balloon," which brought Barthelme acclaim as a master of the short story. From there, his reputation as a Postmodern writer, primarily of short stories, continued to grow, although he did publish three novels in his lifetime and one posthumous novel. Barthelme helped start a creative writing program at the University of Houston, where he mentored young writers. He also taught creative writing at Boston University and the University of Buffalo. He was married four times and had two daughters. In 1989, Donald Barthelme died of throat cancer.

Barthelme's short story, "The School," is an excellent example of his style as a writer. Barthelme is able to take the general concerns of our human condition— concerns over the purpose of life or the reasons we die—and put them in the mouths of school children. Also, he blends both humor and seriousness in one story.

6.14.1 "The School"

Please click the link below to access this selection:

<http://www.npr.org/programs/death/readings/stories/bart.html>

6.14.2 Reading and Review Questions

1. How does Barthelme use humor as a rhetorical technique in this story? What about death as a rhetorical technique?
2. At what point does the story feel unrealistic to you as a reader?
3. What do you think will happen to the gerbil at the end of the story?
4. What, if anything, do you think that Barthelme's story has to say about schools?
5. How is this story similar to and different from other postmodern stories that you've read?

6.15 SYLVIA PLATH (1932 - 1963)



Image 6.11 | Sylvia Plath, n.d.

Photographer | Unknown

Source | Wikipedia

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Sylvia Plath was born in Boston, Massachusetts. Plath's father, a professor of biology at Boston University and an authoritarian figure within the family, died when Plath was eight years old, and Plath struggled for the rest of her life to come to terms with her complicated feelings for him. Plath's mother went to work to provide for Plath and her brother. From a young age, Plath was a high achiever, showing an early talent as a writer and poet. She received a scholarship to Smith College and, after graduating, was awarded a Fulbright Scholarship to Cambridge University. In spite of a history of depression and one suicide attempt, Plath excelled at academics and worked diligently on her writing, periodically publishing her work. At Cambridge,

Plath met the young, upcoming British poet Ted Hughes; the two shared an intense and immediate attraction, marrying only a few months later. Plath and Hughes enjoyed their first years together as writing partners, encouraging each other as poets. The two lived for a time in America, travelled broadly, and eventually returned to England to live. Plath gave birth to two children and engaged in domestic routines while still working on poems which would eventually be included in her posthumous collection, *Ariel* (1965). She continued to struggle with depression, and after discovering Ted Hughes's affair with a mutual friend, Assia Wevill, Plath's depression worsened. She eventually separated from Hughes and moved to London with her children in an attempt to start over on her own. Most of the poems that comprise *Ariel* were written while she lived in London. During a particularly difficult winter where she saw her novel *The Bell Jar* published to less than enthusiastic reviews in January 1963, Plath's mental state deteriorated. She committed suicide in February 1963, leaving her children behind, as well as the new collection of poems that would eventually make her famous after her death.

Plath's most critically acclaimed poems are those that appeared in her posthumous collection, *Ariel*. In these last poems composed before her suicide, Plath appears to have reached a new level of creative complexity in imagery and theme. Her poems exhibit a raw power and anger, as she battles with despair and attempts to find the fortitude to endure her psychic pain. Within the postmodern milieu and contributing to its innovations, Plath does not create a distinct persona through which she filters these intense, private emotions. Poetic form and tradition become less significant with postmodern poets, and the poet's voice achieves primacy, especially in the school of poetry termed "Confessional." Poets such as Allen Ginsberg, Anne Sexton, and Plath in the 1950s were willing to probe their psyches in very private, personal ways, "confessing" their deepest, most private, even disturbing feelings. In the time period, this kind of psychological probing of the self was new and provocative. From a feminist perspective, Plath in the *Ariel* poems openly explores her feelings of rage against the men in her life and against patriarchal authority in general. Plath also explores her feelings of ambivalence about being a mother, the cultural pressures she experienced of becoming a wife and mother, the pain she endured as a result of her husband's infidelity, and her battle with depression that culminated in suicide attempts. In "Daddy," the prevalent Nazi imagery is not autobiographical but is used to depict the extreme emotions at work in the narrative voice's desperate, raging attempt to cut the cord of paternalistic domination. The narrative voice urgently and angrily wants to break from daddy's control, domination, and influence in order to forge her own identity as a woman and as a person. In "Fever 103°," the narrative voice offers hallucinogenic images of a fevered self, burned pure of fleshly needs and desires into an acetylene virgin, a bodiless entity that is almost invisible but

nevertheless combustible. In her virginal state, untouched by the “lecherous” patriarchy, she is most volatile—and powerful.

6.15.1 “Daddy”

Please click the link below to access this selection:

<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/178960>

6.15.2 “Fever 103”

Please click the link below to access this selection:

<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/learning/guide/179981#poem>

6.15.3 Reading and Review Questions

1. In Plath’s “Daddy,” analyze the imagery of Nazism associated with the “father” in the poem. What is the meaning of the imagery? Why is it so extreme?
2. In “Daddy,” who or what is the narrator trying to break away from? Explain the nature of this break or escape the narrator is trying to make.
3. How would you describe the narrator of “Daddy”: a victim? a survivor? a heroine?
4. In “Fever 103°” examine ways in which the flesh and the spirit (or soul) are distinguished through imagery.
5. Examine the nature of “fever” in “Fever 103°.” What is the symbolic significance of “fever” in the poem?
6. Analyze the terms “purity” and “sin” in the poem in light the narrator’s apparent transformation.

6.16 DON DELILLO (1936 -)

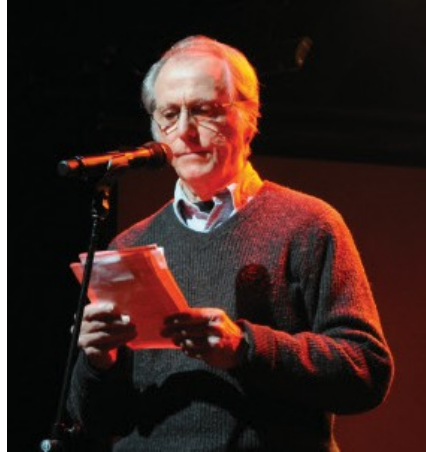


Image 6.12 | Don DeLillo, 2011

Photographer | User "Thousand Robots"

Source | Wikimedia Commons

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In the sixteen darkly satiric novels he has published to date, Don DeLillo shows us how disorienting, mysterious and absurd life in postmodern America can be. DeLillo was born in Brooklyn, New York, and graduated from Fordham University in the Bronx. While DeLillo is known for his careful research and erudition, he admits that “I never liked school” in a rare 2000 interview in the *South Atlantic Quarterly*. Instead, he explains that he received his education primarily from New York City itself, in particular from the city’s intense avant-garde artistic culture on display in its modern art museums, jazz clubs, and art cinemas. After college, DeLillo stayed in the city to work for an advertising agency, quitting in 1964 after five years to pursue a career as a writer. Since then he has published in venues ranging from *The Kenyon Review* and *The New Yorker* to *Rolling Stone* and *Sports Illustrated* and has won dozens of awards, including a Guggenheim Fellowship, the National Book Award for Fiction, and the **PEN/ Faulkner Award**. DeLillo’s capacious work centers around a wide cast of familiar American characters, from football players, rock stars, writers, and child prodigies to college professors, spies, stock brokers, and the real-world assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald—all of whom live in an America that is saturated with media, obsessed with violent entertainment, prone to conspiracy, overloaded with sensation, overcrowded with the detritus of militarism and capitalism, and poised on the brink of apocalypse. To represent the superabundance of contemporary American culture—from the lives we live to those we mythologize to those we know only through movies and TV—DeLillo has worked in numerous narrative forms, including the sports novel (*End Zone* 1972 and *Amazons* 1980), the rock and role **satire** (*Great Jones Street* 1972), science fiction (*Ratner’s Star* 1976), the thriller (*Players* 1977, *Running Dog* 1978, and *The Names* 1982), the weighty modernist odyssey

(*Cosmopolis* 2003), the dense postmodernist historical novel (*Underworld* 1997, *Libra* 1988, and *Mao II* 1991), and even closely observed American realism (*Falling Man* 2007).

DeLillo's academic satire *White Noise*, a selection of which is included here, received the National Book Award for Fiction in 1985. *White Noise* represents what everyday American life is like for "men and women who live," as DeLillo describes in a 1993 *Paris Review* interview, "in the particular skin of the late twentieth century." *White Noise* holds an estranging mirror to 1980s Cold War American culture, foregrounding the absurdity behind much everyday American behavior. The novel is narrated by Jake Gladney—a professor of an invented academic field called "Hitler Studies"—who is so disconnected from the real Adolph Hitler that he doesn't even know German and does not study the Holocaust. A four-time divorcee, Jake lives in a house full of the children from his past marriages and his present wife, a woman addicted to a drug that cures her fear of death. DeLillo uses the misadventures of Professor Gladney to explore themes ranging from consumerism, non-traditional families, addiction, and medicalization to conspiracies, mass destruction, the relation of media to reality, and the mystery of life itself. In the brief section included here, Jake has accompanied his colleague Murray Jay Siskind (a professor who wants to create a new academic field modeled on Hitler Studies called "Elvis Presley Studies") to "The Most Photographed Barn in America." The visit to this piece of Americana then becomes an occasion for DeLillo's characters to converse about what it means to live in America today.

6.16.1 "The Most Photographed Barn in America" (excerpt from *White Noise*)

Please click the link below to access this selection:

<http://text-relations.blogspot.com/2011/03/most-photographed-barn-in-america.html>

6.16.2 Reading and Review Questions

1. "No one sees the barn," Murray observes. Why does no one see the barn?
2. In his influential essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," the cultural theorist Walter Benjamin argues that photographs and films strip their original objects of the "aura" of authenticity by removing them from the traditions and situations of which they are organically a part. One cannot photograph the entire material history of a work of art, after all. Murray argues that "every photograph" taken of the barn actually "reinforces the aura" it possesses. If photographs strip things of their aura of authenticity then how can this be? Describe

the aura these pictures reinforce. What is unique or artistic about this barn, if anything? What do we see when we look within the barn's much-photographed aura?

6.17 ALICE WALKER (1944 -)



Image 6.13 | Alice Walker, n.d.

Photographer | User "Applegirl77"

Source | [Wikimedia Commons](#)

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Born in Eatonton, Georgia, Alice Walker grew up in rural middle Georgia. Her father was a sharecropper, and her mother was a maid. Although they lived under Jim Crow laws in Georgia, in which African-Americans were discouraged from education, Walker's parents turned her away from working in the fields, espousing instead the importance of education and enrolling her in school at an early age. Walker describes writing at the age of eight years old, largely as a result of growing up in what was a strong oral culture.

In 1952, Walker injured her eye after her brother accidentally shot her with a BB gun. Since the family did not have a car, it was a week before Walker received medical attention. By this time, she was blind in that eye, with scar tissue forming. As a result, Walker became shy and withdrawn, yet, years later, after the scar tissue healed, she became more confident and gregarious, graduating high school as the valedictorian, Walker writes about this in her essay, "Beauty: When

the Other Dancer is the Self.” Walker left Eatonton for Atlanta, attending Spelman College, a prestigious Historically Black College for women, and later receiving a scholarship to Sarah Lawrence College in New York. Walker considers her time in New York as critical for her development. While there, Walker became involved in the Black Arts movement before her work in the Civil Rights movement brought her back to the South. In 1969, Walker took a teaching position as Writer-in-Residence at Jackson State College in Jackson, Mississippi before accepting the same position at Tougaloo College in Tougaloo, Mississippi. While there, she published her debut novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970). However, Walker soon returned to New York to join the editorial staff of *Ms.* magazine. Her second novel, *Meridian* (1976), received positive reviews, but her third novel, *The Color Purple* (1982), perhaps best showcases her writing talents. This novel draws on some of Walker’s personal experiences as well as demonstrates Walker’s own creativity. For it, she won the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize. This novel was later adapted as a popular film. In addition to her engagement as an activist in many key issues, Walker has continued to write, publishing the famous book of essays, *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens* (1983), as well as several other novels, such as *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992). One theme that emerges in Walker’s work is acknowledging the contributions of, often under-appreciated, African-American writers, such writers as Zora Neale Hurston. Furthermore, Walker’s writing calls attention to the discrepancies in America’s treatment of African-Americans, while also acknowledging the importance of all Americans’ shared past. In “Everyday Use,” we see many of these themes coalesce in the conflict between sisters Dee and Magee. Although they are sisters, these two have very different lives, which leads to the central tension of the story—their argument over the quilt.

6.17.1 “Everyday Use”

Please click the link below to access this selection:

<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~ug97/quilt/walker.html>

6.17.2 Reading and Review Questions

1. Why does Dee take Polaroids? Why does she change her name? What does this signify?
2. What does the quilt represent?
3. Dee and Magee are both interested in the quilt for different reasons. Why is each sister interested in the quilt? Who does Mama side with in this conflict? Why?

6.18 LESLIE MARMON SILKO (1948 -)



Image 6.14 | Leslie Marmon Silko, 2011

Photographer | Uche Ohbuji

Source | Wikimedia Commons

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Leslie Marmon Silko was born in Albuquerque, New Mexico, but raised in the outskirts of Old Laguna, a Pueblo village. Silko describes a lively childhood spent outdoors, one which included riding horses and hunting deer. Although Silko enjoys one-fourth Pueblo ancestry, she also shares Mexican ancestry; Silko did not live on the Laguna Pueblo reservation, and Silko was not allowed to participate in many Pueblo rituals. Through the fourth grade, she attended a Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) school, only to later commute to Manzano Day School, a Catholic private school in Albuquerque. After high school, Silko enrolled at the University of New Mexico, where she earned a bachelor's degree in English. After college, Silko taught creative writing courses at the University of New Mexico before enrolling in their American Indian law program. As her literary career blossomed, Silko dropped out to focus on her writing. Silko would later spend several years as a professor of English and Creative Writing at the University of Arizona in Tucson, where she currently resides.

Silko's first published short story, "The Man to Send Rain Clouds" (1969), was originally written for a class in college and was based around a similar autobiographic event. The story earned Silko an National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) grant and, as Silko continued to publish, her literary reputation grew. In 1974, her first book, *Laguna Woman*, featured a selection of Silko's poems and short fiction; however, it was the emergence of her debut novel, *Ceremony* (1977), which brought her national recognition and established her as a prominent Native American writer. Since then, Silko has remained one of the most respected contemporary

American writers: her short story collection, *Storyteller* (1981), was well received and, in the same year, Silko was awarded the famed MacArthur Genius Grant. Her other novels include *Almanac of the Dead* (1991) and *Gardens in the Dunes* (1999). In 1996, Silko published *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit*, a collection of essays on Native American life; these essays discuss many contemporary issues relevant to Native Americans as well as her own reflections on her storytelling background and writing process.

Silko's Native American heritage, especially her Pueblo upbringing, is a major thematic element which emerges within her writing regardless of its genre, albeit poetry, fiction, or nonfiction. In "Yellow Woman," a part of her *Storyteller* collection, Silko is able to merge traditional Pueblo legends with a contemporary tale. Part action/adventure story and part mythology, "Yellow Woman" seamlessly tells the tale of a narrator who may or may not be caught up in Laguna ancestral lore.

6.18.1 "The Yellow Woman"

Please click the link below to access this selection:

https://moodle2.unifr.ch/pluginfile.php/268379/mod_resource/content/1/Silko%20Yellow%20Woman.pdf

6.18.2 Reading and Review Questions

1. What elements seem out of time? What effect on readers do these anachronistic elements have?
2. Is this a story of alienation or community? How does the narrator use the Kachina yellow woman story to connect with her community?
3. Is this a story about humanity or the mystical?

6.19 DAVID FOSTER WALLACE (1962 - 2008)



Image 6.15 | David Foster Wallace, 2006

Photographer | Steve Rhodes

Source | Wikimedia Commons

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David Foster Wallace was born in Ithaca, New York, but was raised in Urbana, Illinois. The son of two academics, his father, James Donald Wallace, was a philosophy professor at the University of Illinois, while his mother, Mary Jean Foster, was an English professor at Parkland College. During his youth, Wallace was a regionally ranked junior tennis player (an interest that would emerge as a subject in many of his writings). Wallace attended Amherst College, where he majored in both English and Philosophy. His first novel, *The Broom of the System* (1987), was based on his undergraduate thesis. After his undergraduate studies, Wallace enrolled at the University of Arizona, where he earned his M.F.A. in fiction; he then enrolled in a philosophy graduate program at Harvard University before dropping out during his first semester and admitting himself into a mental institution. From this time onward, Wallace began to take a greater interest in fiction, especially postmodern fiction, reading writers such as John Barth and Donald Barthelme, who were influential on his writing.

Wallace's debut novel, *The Broom of the System*, led to several influential publications, yet, it was his novel, *Infinite Jest* (1996), which earned him universal accolades, including landing him on the cover of *Time Magazine*. It also earned him the MacArthur Genius Grant (1997). Considered one of the greatest novels in the last fifty years, *Infinite Jest* deals with popular themes found in Wallace's work, such as addiction and media's growing influence in our culture.

Wallace was a rare writer, who wrote about a variety of topics, ranging from tennis, to writing the first critical study of rap, to a book on the concept of infinity. In 2004, he married painter Karen Green and, in 2008, after years of dealing with clinical depression, Wallace committed suicide. Posthumously, his estate published the novel *The Pale King* (2011) which was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. Since his suicide, Wallace has captivated the public and been the subject of countless essays and features. In 2009, Jon Krasinski adapted a film version of Wallace's book *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. In 2015, a film based on David Lipski's book length

interview with Wallace, *Although in the End You End Up Becoming Yourself* (2010), was released under the title, *At the End of the Tour*.

“Consider the Lobster,” originally published in *Gourmet* magazine, is a great example of Wallace’s mass appeal, his ability to write about a seemingly simple event, a Lobster Festival, with humor and nuance, while uncovering the complex issues that arise from the festival. In many ways, Wallace’s commencement speech to Kenyon College, “This is Water” (2005), later published as a stand-alone book, *This is Water* (2009), perfects that approach of writing for a mass audience. “This is Water” is said to be the culmination of his common themes as a writer, the most important of which is sincerity. In the speech, Wallace reminds audiences that although we all tend towards narcissism, it is important to try to be altruistic. Other themes found in Wallace’s work include a growing concern with our changing culture, the increasing presence of media, as well as the effects of addiction.

6.19.1 “This is Water”

Please click the link below to access this selection:

<http://www.metastatic.org/text/This%20is%20Water.pdf>

6.19.2 “Consider the Lobster”

Please click the link below to access this selection:

<http://www.columbia.edu/~col8/lobsterarticle.pdf>

6.19.3 Reading and Review Questions

1. What does the title “This is Water” mean? How does this title emerge as a main theme of his speech?
2. What does Wallace mean by “default mode”? For example, how, according to Wallace, can our default mode be dangerous? Why does Wallace feel this is such an important lesson for graduates?
3. Examine the structure of “Consider the Lobster.” How does Wallace develop his argument about the ethos of eating lobster? What is his argument?
4. How do you think the original readers of *Gourmet*, where “Consider the Lobster” was first published, reacted to this essay? Why do you think they printed it?

6.20KEY TERMS

- Adrienne Rich
- Alice Walker
- Allen Ginsberg
- Beat Literature
- City Lights Books
- Cold War
- Cosmic Vision
- David Foster Wallace
- Dialect
- Deconstruction
- Don DeLillo
- Donald Barthleme
- Explicit
- Flannery Othlemer
- Flash Fiction
- GI Bill
- Gravitass
- Implicit
- James Baldwin
- James Dickey
- Jim Crow Laws
- Korean War
- Leslie Marmon Silko
- Metanarrative
- National Book Award
- PEN/Faulkner Award
- Postmodernism
- Poststructuralist
- Pulitzer Prize
- Ralph Ellison

- Satire
- Signs
- Southern Gothic
- Southern Renaissance
- Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)
- Sylvia Plath
- Tennessee Williams
- Theodore Roethke
- Toni Morrison
- World War II