

# Modernism in Historical Context

**KEY IDEAS** Catastrophic historical events—including a devastating war and a deep economic depression—as well as rapid societal change profoundly affected the writing of this period.

## A World at War

World War I—the **Great War**—was perhaps the most influential force on American writers of the early 20th century. The war broke out in Europe in 1914; before it ended in 1918, it involved 32 nations, including the United States, and took the lives of over 20 million people. It was a new kind of war, waged on a massive scale with terrible new weapons that reflected the technological advances of the time—machine guns, poison gases, airplane bombers, and submarines. Old ideals about the purposes and meaning of war were destroyed in the carnage. As Lieutenant Frederic Henry, a character in **Ernest Hemingway's** 1929 novel *A Farewell to Arms*, observed: “Words such as glory, honor, courage, or hallow were obscene.” For many Americans, the war signaled an end to idealism and ushered in an era marked by hedonism, political corruption, and ruthless business practices.

## The Jazz Age

Some Americans, disillusioned with the traditional values that had led to war, sought escape in the pleasures of entertainment and good times. The 1920s, with its booming economy, became known as the **Roaring Twenties**. Writer **F. Scott Fitzgerald** called this decade “the greatest, gaudiest spree in history.” As incomes rose, people were able to spend more money on goods and leisure activities. In addition, many young people began, for the first time, to rebel as a group against the values of the past and the authority of their elders. They experimented with new fashions and new attitudes, actively seeking out fun and freedom.

**A NEW ERA FOR WOMEN** Women of the period saw their lives change in fundamental ways. In 1920, the passage of the **19th Amendment** finally gave women the right to vote. But the vote was just one facet of the changing nature of womanhood. The 1920s saw the emergence of the **flapper**, an emancipated young woman who embraced new fashions and the urban attitudes of the day. By 1930, ten million American women were earning wages in the workplace—another new frontier. In addition, family life was made increasingly easier by technological innovations, from ready-made clothes to sliced bread. Many women writers, such as **Edna St. Vincent Millay** and **Dorothy Parker**, were celebrated as much for their modern lifestyles as for their writing. In turn, they often wrote about the clash between traditional and modern values, celebrating youth, independence, and freedom from social constraints.

**JAZZ CULTURE** This period also saw the passage of **Prohibition** (1920–1933), in which alcohol was made illegal. In defiance of this restriction, many people drank in illegal nightclubs called speakeasies, as gangsters made fortunes running and supplying the clubs. At the fancy Cotton Club in New York's Harlem neighborhood, the guests—all whites—rubbed shoulders with celebrities and gangsters as they listened to the great jazz performers—all blacks—who helped give the era its name: the **Jazz Age**.

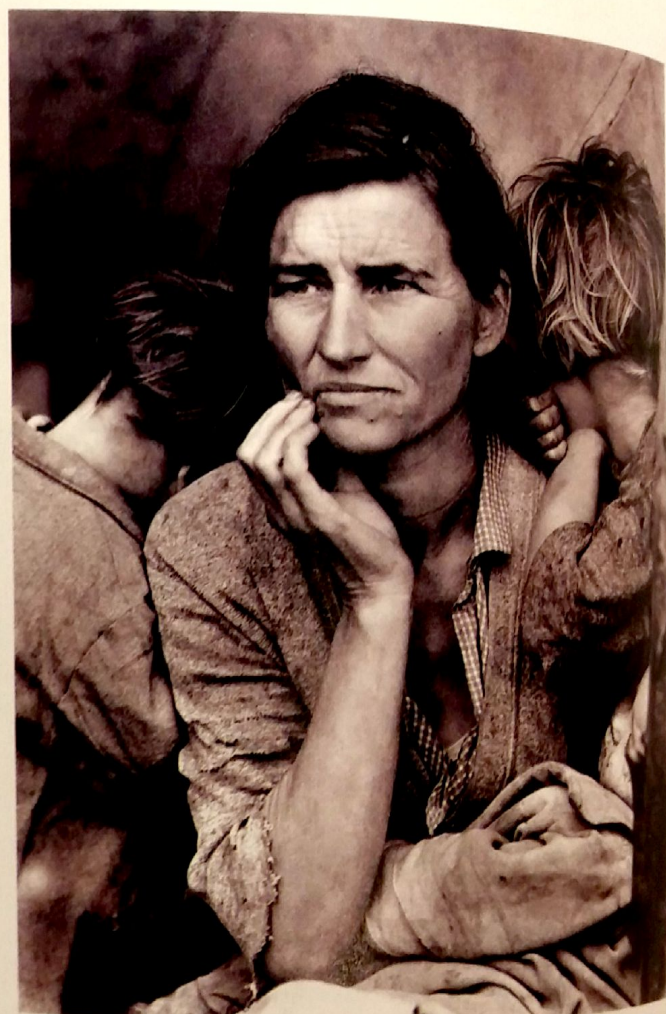
## The Great Depression

The good times came to a dramatic end when the stock market crashed in October 1929, plunging the nation into economic depression. During the **Great Depression**, so called for its length and severity, many banks failed, businesses floundered, and workers lost their jobs. By 1933, the unemployment rate had grown to 25 percent. Unable to pay their bills, thousands of people lost their homes, and millions went hungry.

**THE DUST BOWL** A severe drought that began in the early 1930s added to the nation's pain. When the drought began, winds picked up dirt from the dry, exhausted fields of the Great Plains. Huge dust storms arose, damaging farms across a 150,000-square-mile region called the **Dust Bowl**.

Ruined farmers set off with their families to find work, many traveling west to California. Unfortunately, little work was to be found in California, for it, like the rest of the nation, was suffering through the Great Depression. Writers such as **John Steinbeck** captured the uncertainty and despair of the times: "Carloads, caravans, homeless and hungry; twenty thousand and fifty thousand and a hundred thousand and two hundred thousand. They streamed over the mountains, hungry and restless—restless as ants, scurrying to find work to do."

**THE NEW DEAL** The country was desperate for help. During his presidential campaign in 1932, Franklin Delano Roosevelt pledged to give the country a "new deal." When elected, he fulfilled his promise by enacting various **New Deal** programs—relief for the homeless and hungry, recovery for agriculture and business, and various economic reforms to prevent such a severe depression from occurring again. Yet in truth, it was the massive spending and production spurred by World War II that finally brought the economic crisis to an end.



*Migrant Mother* by Dorothea Lange, 1936. This photograph of Florence Owens Thompson with her children came to symbolize the Great Depression for many Americans.

# Cultural Influences

**KEY IDEAS** A developing mass culture and ideas that challenged traditional thought provided fodder for writers of the time.

## New Directions

**MASS CULTURE** The 1920s was the first decade to be significantly shaped by **mass media**. New goods—from cars to toasters to beauty products—were flooding the market, and businesses relied on advertising to sell them. Thanks to advertising, items people had formerly considered luxuries were now deemed necessities. Mass media quickly became the ultimate source for this manufacturing of desire.

**Mass production** quickly and efficiently produced Americans' newfound necessities, but efficiency came with a price. Henry Ford perfected the assembly-line system, but its repetitiveness and monotony reduced workers to nameless, faceless cogs in the production process. And its products, efficiently mass-produced, led to the homogenization of American culture.

**Sinclair Lewis** and many other significant writers of the day were alienated by the new values and lifestyles of their peers and soon began to criticize what they saw as Americans' conformity and materialism.

**NEW IDEAS** The writers of this period were also influenced by exciting new ideas that were challenging Americans' traditional views. A literary technique called **stream of consciousness** developed from the psychoanalytic theories of **Sigmund Freud**, who proposed that unconscious forces drive human beings and that the key to understanding behavior lay in this deeper realm of the mind. **Karl Marx's** socioeconomic theories—that history is a constant struggle between classes, for example—found their way into some of the literature of the day, mainly that of Depression-era writers. And **Albert Einstein's** theory that everything is relative, that there are no absolutes, offered writers a fresh new way of looking at the world.



Print advertisements from the 1920s and 1930s

### A Voice from the Times

*It's the fellow with four to ten thousand a year . . . and an automobile and a nice little family in a bungalow . . . that makes the wheels of progress go round! That's the type of fellow that's ruling America today[!]*

—Sinclair Lewis  
from *Babbalanza*

# Modern Literature and the Harlem Renaissance

**KEY IDEAS** The writers of this period, working in a variety of genres and focusing on discrete themes, were markedly influenced by the events and culture of the day. Many responded by embracing all things new, while others celebrated their heritage.

## The New Poetry

At the beginning of the century, rapid industrialization and urbanization caused many Americans to feel that the social order governing their lives was crumbling. Poets of the day began to explore in their work the impact of rapid change and uncertainty on the individual.

**Edgar Lee Masters**, in his famous collection *Spoon River Anthology*, used free verse to probe the discontent beneath the apparent stability of small-town life in the United States. *Spoon River Anthology* found a wide audience, in part because it voiced concerns shared by many Americans about the transformation from a rural to an industrialized society. Like Masters, **Edwin Arlington Robinson** also exposed the tensions underlying small-town life. His poems draw psychological portraits of characters isolated in the midst of American society. In portraying their isolation, Robinson was a forerunner of the modernist movement. These poets charted new territory by challenging conventional attitudes.

Others, such as **Carl Sandburg**, **Robert Frost**, and **Edna St. Vincent Millay**, seemed to be more connected to earlier traditions that focused on nature and common people. Yet they, too, revealed an awareness of the changes sweeping the American landscape. For this reason, Millay, Sandburg, and Frost can be called transitional poets, those who connect past traditions with modern thought.

**MODERNISM** Other poets of this period belong to the literary movement called **modernism** (see page 894). Modernism arose as a direct response to the social and intellectual forces shaping the 20th century. Modernist writers, many of whom were expatriates living in Europe, responded to the loss of idealism they felt in the wake of World War I. Living abroad, they experienced both the immediate and the long-term effects of World War I more acutely than did Americans at home. Most modernists also saw mass society as a threat to the individual, especially the artist. They felt that the standardization of culture resulted in alienation—a theme they captured in their work.

Experimentation was a distinguishing characteristic of these writers. “Make it new,” extolled **Ezra Pound** as he urged fellow poets to abandon the artifice of past forms and search for their individual voices. **Harriet Monroe**, editor of *Poetry* magazine, wrote that the new poetry “has set before itself an ideal of absolute simplicity and sincerity—an ideal which implies an individual, unsteretyped diction; and an individual, unsteretyped rhythm.” The lack of



Works by transitional poets Millay, Frost, and Sandburg

### ► For Your Outline

#### THE NEW POETRY

- Poets began to challenge conventional thought.
- Modernists responded to historical forces such as WWI and an increasing mass society.
- Experimentation characterized modernism.
- Imagists believed that poetry should be expressed through the “rendering of concrete objects.”
- Imagists favored free verse.
- In objectivist poetry, objects speak for themselves.

“stereotypes,” however, made any recognizable movement hard to sustain: as soon as a style became accepted, it also became a new standard against which to rebel. The result was that modernist poetry as a body of work is as fragmented as many of its individual poems.

**IMAGISM** Many of the so-called new poets did, however, share the belief that poetry is most profoundly expressed through the “rendering of concrete objects.” Ezra Pound called this kind of poetry **imagism** because it sought to re-create an image—not comment on it, not interpret it, but just present it. Pound became the center of a circle of poets, including **H. D.** (Hilda Doolittle) and **Amy Lowell**, who cast off the sentimentality, formal structures, and rhyme schemes of their predecessors and exploded into **free verse** (poetry without a predictable rhyme or metric scheme). Ezra Pound was especially taken with the poetry of **T. S. Eliot**, whose *The Waste Land* is considered one of the most representative and influential of modernist poems.

**OBJECTIVISM** One modernist poet, **William Carlos Williams**, however, vehemently disliked *The Waste Land* for its intellectualism and its references to classical literature. In response to Eliot’s complex ideas and academic references, Williams famously stated that there are “no ideas but in things.” Williams became the center of a new movement in modernist poetry called **objectivism**, in which poets let the objects they rendered speak for themselves. These poets invited readers to experience the homely simplicity of an object for no other reason than to understand its “this-ness.”

The modernist movement had an enormous impact on later poets. Many poets today prefer to communicate through images rather than direct statements. They believe in economy of words and continue to experiment with free verse. Poetry had been altered irrevocably.

### A Voice from the Times

*so much depends  
upon*

*a red wheel  
barrow*

*glazed with rain  
water*

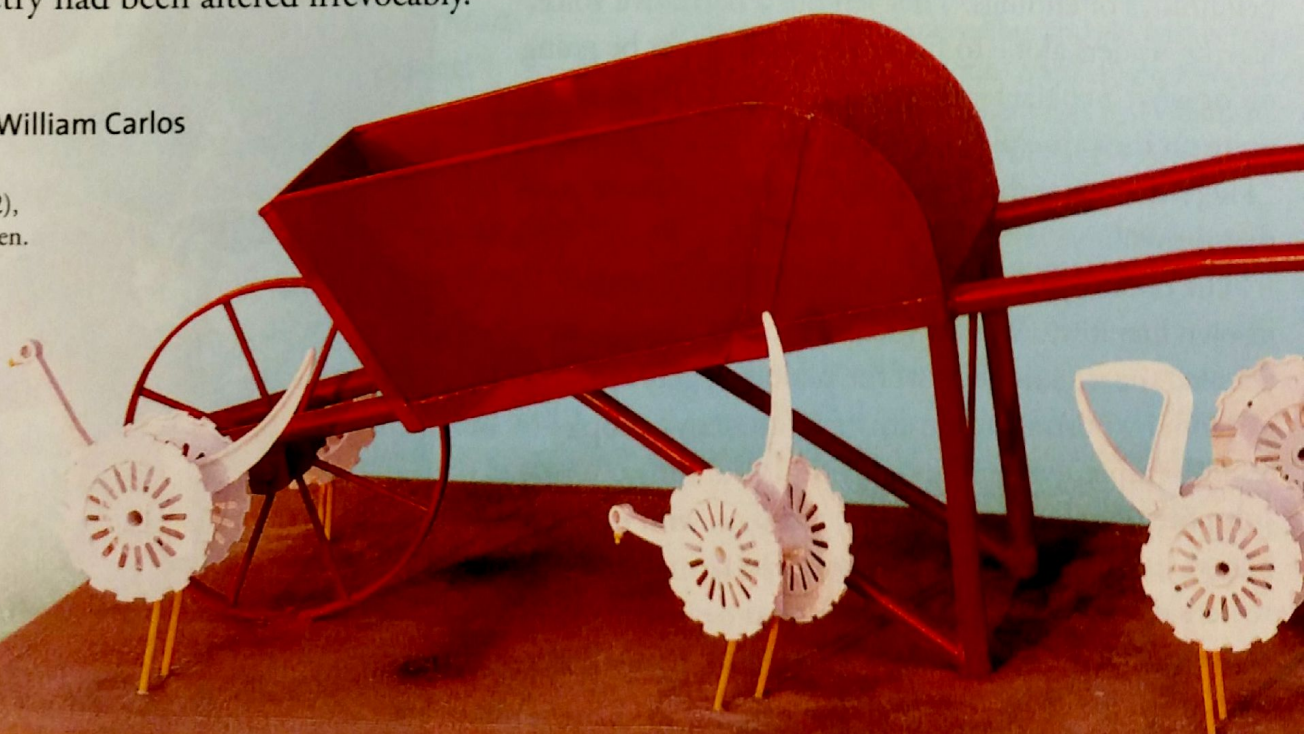
*beside the white  
chickens.*

—William Carlos Williams

“The Red Wheelbarrow”

Sculpture inspired by William Carlos Williams’s poem

*The Red Wheelbarrow* (1992),  
Frank Jensen. © Frank Jensen.



## The Modern Short Story

Poetry was not the only form popular during this period. In fact, the period from 1890 to 1930 has been called “the Age of the Short Story” in American literature. The great popularity of the short story has often been attributed to the American temperament. Americans living in the first half of the 20th century were too impatient and too much in a hurry to read longer works. They wanted “fast” literature, just as Americans today want fast food.

Other factors contributed to the popularity of the short story as well. New methods of advertising had brought about a boom in magazine publication. As the number of magazines grew, so did the demand for short stories. In turn, magazines paid their writers handsome fees. At one point, **F. Scott Fitzgerald** was receiving as much as \$4,000 for a single story. **William Faulkner**, who complained that writing short stories interfered with his more serious, longer works, earned more from the sale of four short stories to the *Saturday Evening Post* than he did from his first four novels.

**THEMES PULLED FROM LIFE** The upheavals of this period in American history provided rich fodder for short story writers. World War I turned many Americans’ idealism into uncertainty. Civilization as people had known it was being destroyed, and writers sought to capture in their work the resulting alienation and confusion. Indeed, World War I shook the ideological foundations of some young American writers so profoundly that **Gertrude Stein**, an American writer living in Paris, called them “the lost generation.”

These alienated writers broke with the traditions of the past, turning to new methods and stylistic devices to carry their themes. **Ernest Hemingway** and other writers composed short, fragmentary stories without traditional beginnings or endings. They left out a narrative voice, leaving readers alone to figure out what might be going on or what a character might be feeling. “I always try to write on the principle of the iceberg,” Hemingway said. “There is seven-eighths of it under water for every part that shows.”

The boom years of the Roaring Twenties inspired its own literature. Writers such as **F. Scott Fitzgerald** revealed the negative side of the period’s gaiety and freedom by portraying wealthy and attractive people leading empty lives in their gilded surroundings. Writer **John Steinbeck** is most closely identified with the bust years of the Great Depression. Declaring that a writer’s duty is to “set down his time as nearly as he can understand it,” Steinbeck managed to tell, perhaps better than anyone else, the stories of ordinary people caught up

### ► For Your Outline

#### MODERN SHORT STORY

- 1890–1930 called the “Age of the Short Story”
- stories’ popularity due to American temperament and growth of magazines
- “lost generation” alienated by WWI
- wrote fragmentary stories without traditional beginning or ending

#### THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE

- a flowering of African-American arts
- expressions of what it meant to be black in a white-dominated world
- came to an end with the Great Depression

An illustration of the Roaring Twenties high life, which served as inspiration for writers such as F. Scott Fitzgerald



in the Great Depression and lost from the devastation of the Dust Bowl.

Steinbeck, Eudora Welty, and many other writers of the time were beneficiaries of one of President Roosevelt's New Deal programs, the Works Progress Administration (WPA). The WPA was set up to create as many jobs as possible, as quickly as possible, including work for the nation's artists and writers. As the head of the WPA put it, "They've got to eat just like other people." Eudora Welty traveled around Mississippi for the WPA, writing articles about various projects under way in the state. She later said that these travels introduced her to the very different ways in which people lived, inspiring her later writing.

## The Harlem Renaissance

Beginning in 1916 and continuing throughout the 1920s, in what came to be known as the **Great Migration**, millions of black farmers and sharecroppers moved to the urban North in search of opportunity and freedom from oppression and racial hostility. Thousands of these migrants settled in Harlem, a New York City neighborhood that quickly became the cultural center of African-American life.

Soon, the very air in Harlem seemed charged with creativity as black men and women drew on their own cultural resources—their folk traditions as well as a new urban awareness—to produce unique forms of expression. Harlem attracted worldly and race-conscious African Americans who nurtured each other's artistic, musical, and literary talents and created a flowering of African-American arts known as the **Harlem Renaissance**.

**A LITERARY MOVEMENT** The event that unofficially kicked off the Harlem Renaissance as a literary movement was a dinner given on March 21, 1924. Some of the nation's most celebrated writers and thinkers, black and white, gathered at New York City's Civic Club. The sponsors of the dinner—an older generation of African-American intellectuals that included **W. E. B. Du Bois**, **James Weldon Johnson**, and **Charles S. Johnson**—had begun organizations such as the National Urban League and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People to promote equality for African Americans. These organizations published journals in which the writings of a younger generation were first published. **Countee Cullen**, **Zora Neale Hurston**, and **Langston Hughes** were among the young writers who received recognition and sometimes cash awards for

## THE ARTISTS' GALLERY



*The Migration of the Negro Panel no. 1* (1940–1941), Jacob Lawrence Casein tempera on hardboard, 12" x 18". Acquired 1942. The Phil Collection, Washington, D.C. © The Estate of Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence/Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York.

### Jacob Lawrence

The Harlem Renaissance was not only a literary movement but a flourishing movement of the visual arts as well. Since it was difficult for black Americans of the day to attend art academies as their white counterparts did, the art schools and workshops of Harlem provided vital training for many of America's finest black artists. Jacob Lawrence was one of the first to be educated by the African-American community in Harlem.

**Harlem as Muse** Lawrence found inspiration in the streets of Harlem. His early work depicted the community—its people, sidewalks, streets, and storefronts—in bold colors and elemental shapes. He once said that 1930s "was actually a wonderful period in Harlem. . . . There was real vitality in the community." Lawrence rubbed elbows there with writers and artists such as Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Romare Bearden, and Augusta Savage, all of whom emphasized their cultural identity in their work.

**The Migration Series** The painting shown here was the first in a 60-panel series on the Great Migration. It shows a crowd of Southern migrants about to embark on a journey to three Northern cities. Lawrence's decision to show no faces but only the shapes of hats and coats and luggage enhances the viewer's sense of a crowd surging as one entity toward the station. Lawrence based the paintings in this series on the experiences of his family and other members of his community who took part in the Great Migration.

their work in these journals, and many were present at this “coming-out party” for the writers of the Harlem Renaissance.

These young writers considered themselves the founders of a new era in literature. They looked inward and expressed what it meant to be black in a white-dominated world. They represented what came to be called “the New Negro,” a sophisticated and well-educated African American with strong racial pride and self-awareness. In fact, connections made at that dinner led to a popular and enduring anthology of writing, published in 1925, titled *The New Negro*.

**MANY VOICES** Yet this new generation of writers did not speak with only one voice. Harvard-educated **Countee Cullen**, for example, used a classical style to explore the black struggle. Others cast off more formal language and styles and wrote with the pulse of jazz rhythms. “Jazz is a heartbeat,” wrote Langston Hughes, “and its heartbeat is yours.” Some, like Jamaican-born **Claude McKay**, were militant. McKay’s poem “If We Must Die,” written after race riots in 1919, ends with an image of African Americans “pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!” Others, such as **Jean Toomer**, were more interested in exploring their own identities than the concerns of a whole race. “I was inescapably myself,” he wrote. Despite their varied perspectives, however, these writers shared a deep pride in their heritage and asserted their cultural identity through their work.

The Harlem Renaissance was brought to a premature end by the economic collapse of the Great Depression. Many of the writers who had gathered in Harlem were forced to scatter and take other jobs to support themselves. Nevertheless, their work planted seeds that continue to generate important writing from the African-American perspective.

## Journalism as Literature

In the early decades of the 20th century, journalism came into its own as an influential part of the literary scene (see page 1046). The sensationalism and reckless misinterpretation of facts that had characterized journalism in the last decades of the 19th century were being replaced by an interest in stylistic quality and the recognition that there was more to news than scandal. Many of the writers who were to become major figures in American literature learned their craft—and developed some of their most compelling subjects—writing for newspapers or magazines.

**REPORTING THE ERA** Fresh out of high school in 1917, **Ernest Hemingway** worked as a reporter for the *Kansas City Star*. The newspaper’s strict rules of



Zora Neale Hurston, Harlem Renaissance writer

### ► For Your Outline

#### JOURNALISM AS LITERATURE

- Journalism turned from sensationalism.
- Writers honed their craft at newspapers and magazines.
- Hemingway, Porter, and Steinbeck reported on the day’s big news.
- White, Thurber, and Parker built their reputations at *New Yorker*.



style helped him develop the clear, provocative prose that characterizes his work: "Use short sentences. Use short first paragraphs. Use vigorous English. Be positive, not negative." Hemingway was also a war correspondent who reported on the Spanish Civil War, and he was the first Allied journalist to enter Paris on August 25, 1944—the day it was liberated from Nazi control.

Some other writers who became well-known for their fiction produced fine journalism as well. **Katherine Anne Porter**, for example, worked for several newspapers and magazines. On assignment in 1920, she traveled to Mexico and arrived in the middle of a revolution. Her observations of this conflict later became the subject of several short stories in a collection called *Flowering Judas* (1930), which launched her literary career. **John Steinbeck** turned his hand to journalism as well, reporting in 1936 for the *San Francisco News* about the plight of California's migrant farm workers and working in 1943 as a war correspondent for the *New York Herald Tribune*.

**MAGAZINES ON THE RISE** In the first decades of the 20th century, the popular magazine came into its own as new magazines were created to satisfy every taste and interest. The *New Yorker*, which first appeared in 1925, was founded by one-time newspaperman **Harold Ross**. To staff his new magazine, Ross sought writers with newspaper experience, writers who could grind out "the gleams and sparkles of humor and satire from the grist of human nature and the news of the world." Among them were **E. B. White**, **James Thurber**, and **Dorothy Parker**, who went on to write poetry, short stories, and novels. Yet these writers' reputations as witty, satiric observers of contemporary society were built on the essays, commentary, and book and theater reviews (and in the case of Thurber, cartoons too) that they contributed to the *New Yorker*.

Like poetry and short stories, literary journalism continues to be popular. Today's writers can thank the innovators of the modernist movement, America's giants of the short story form, the groundbreaking writers of the Harlem Renaissance, and the literary journalists of this earlier era for many of the themes, styles, and forms currently in use.

### A Voice from the Times

*This is not a novel to be tossed aside lightly. It should be thrown with great force.*

—Dorothy Parker  
from a literary review

