

SKILLS FOCUS

Literary Skills

Evaluate the philosophical, political, religious, ethical, and social issues of a historical period.

The Moderns (1914–1939)

John Leggett and John Malcolm Brinnin

The following essay provides highlights of the historical period. For a more detailed version of this essay, see *Elements of Literature*, pages 636–643.

World War I (1914–1918), the so-called Great War, was an event that changed the American voice in fiction. The country appeared to have lost its innocence. Idealism had turned to cynicism for many Americans, who began to question the authority and tradition that was thought to be our bedrock. American writers, like their European counterparts, were also deeply influenced by the **modernist** movement. This movement in literature, painting, music, and the other arts called for bold experimentation and a complete rejection of traditional themes and styles.

10 The American Dream: Pursuit of a Promise

The devastation of World War I and the economic crash of the Great Depression a decade later caused Americans to reexamine their ideals. Among the ideals that people began to question were three assumptions that, taken together, we have come to call the **American dream**.

■ America as a New Eden

The first element of the American dream is admiration for America as a new Eden: a land of beauty, bounty, and unlimited promise. Both the promise and the disappointment of this idea

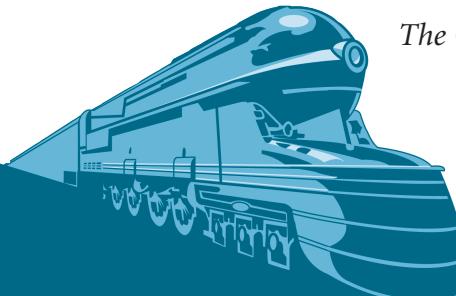
20 are reflected in one of the greatest American novels, *The Great Gatsby* (1925) by F. Scott Fitzgerald.

IDENTIFY

Re-read lines 1–9. Underline what the modernist movement called for.

ANALYZE

Pause at line 15. Why do you think World War I and the Great Depression led Americans to examine their ideals?



EVALUATE

Re-read lines 10–34. Underline the three elements of the **American dream**. Do you think these elements are still part of the American dream today?



■ A Belief in Progress

The second element is optimism, justified by the ever-expanding opportunity many people had come to expect. Americans had come to believe in progress—that life will keep getting better and that wealth, justice, and joy are just around the corner.

■ Triumph of the Individual

The final element in the American dream is the importance and ultimate triumph of the individual—the independent, self-reliant person. This ideal was championed by Ralph Waldo Emerson (page 76), who probably deserves most of the credit for defining the essence of the American dream, including its roots in the promise of the “new Eden” and its faith that “things are getting better all the time.”

A Crack in the World: Breakdown of Beliefs and Traditions

In the postwar period, long-held beliefs and traditions began to be tested. Postwar writers became skeptical of the New England Puritan tradition and the gentility that had been central to the literary ideal. In fact, the center of American literary life now finally started to shift away from New England, which had been the native region of America’s most brilliant writers during the



Village Speakeasy,
Closed for
Violation (c. 1934)
by Ben Shahn.
Tempera on
masonite
($16\frac{3}{8}$ " x $47\frac{7}{8}$ ").
Museum of the City of
New York. Permanent
Deposit of the Public Art
Project through the
Whitney Museum.
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Shahn/Licensed
by VAGA, New York.

Notes

nineteenth century. Many modernist writers, in fact, were born in the South, the Midwest, or the West.

In the postwar period, two new intellectual theories or movements combined to influence previous beliefs and values: **Marxism** and **psychoanalysis**.

Marxism and the Challenge to Free Enterprise

50 In Russia during World War I, a Marxist revolution had toppled and even murdered an anointed ruler, the czar. The socialistic beliefs of Karl Marx (1818–1883) that had powered the Russian Revolution in 1917 conflicted with the American system of capitalism and free enterprise, and Marxists threatened to export their revolution everywhere. Some Americans, however, believed that certain elements of Marxism would provide much-needed rights to workers. After visiting Russia, the American writer Lincoln Steffens reported, “I have seen the future and it works.”

Freud and the Unconscious Mind

60 In Vienna, there was another ground-shaking movement. Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), the founder of psychoanalysis, had

IDENTIFY

Re-read lines 45–47. Locate and circle the names of two new theories or movements that sprang up following World War I.

IDENTIFY

Re-read lines 50–58. What did Americans regard as one positive element of Marxism?

IDENTIFY CAUSE & EFFECT

What effect did the interest in psychology have on narrative techniques (lines 71–77)?

INTERPRET

Pause at line 85. Do you think Prohibition accomplished what its supporters had hoped? Explain.

IDENTIFY

In lines 86–95, circle the important right women finally won. Underline where some writers chose to live.

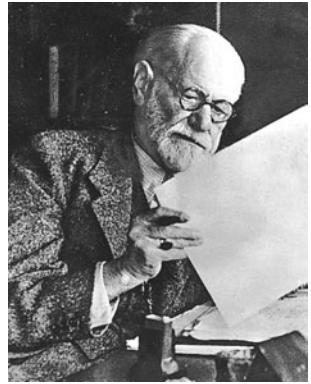
opened the workings of the unconscious mind to examination. He also called for a new understanding of human sexuality and the role it plays in our unconscious thoughts. Throughout America, there was a growing interest in this new field of psychology and a resulting concern about the amount of freedom an individual had if our actions were indeed influenced by an uncontrollable subconscious.

70 One literary result of this interest in the psyche was the narrative technique called **stream of consciousness**. This writing style abandoned chronology and attempted to imitate the moment-by-moment flow of a character's perceptions and memories. American writers William Faulkner (page 217) and Katherine Anne Porter (page 233) used the stream-of-consciousness technique in their works.

At Home and Abroad: The Jazz Age

80 In 1919, the U.S. Constitution was amended to prohibit the manufacture and sale of alcohol, which was considered a social evil. Far from inspiring traditional values, however, Prohibition ushered in an age characterized by the bootlegger, the speakeasy, the short-skirted flapper, the new rhythms of jazz, and the gangster. The writer F. Scott Fitzgerald gave this era its name: the Jazz Age.

During the Jazz Age, women too played a prominent role. In 1920, women won the right to vote, and they began to create a presence in artistic, intellectual, and social circles. As energetic as this era was in America, many American artists and writers—F. Scott Fitzgerald among them—abandoned their own shores for life in France. The wave of Americans living abroad was another signal that something had gone wrong with the American dream—with the idea that America was Eden, with our belief in progress, and especially with the conviction that America was a land of heroes.



Sigmund Freud. © Bettmann/CORBIS.

Grace Under Pressure: The New American Hero

The most influential of all the post–World War I writers was Ernest Hemingway. Hemingway is probably most famous for his literary style, which influenced generations of writers. Like the Puritans who strove for a plain style centuries earlier, Hemingway reduced the fanciness of literary language to the bare bones of the truth it must express.

Hemingway also introduced a new kind of hero to American fiction. The Hemingway hero is a man of action, a warrior, and a tough competitor; he has a code of honor, courage, and endurance. He shows, in Hemingway's own words, "grace under pressure." But above all else, the Hemingway hero is thoroughly disillusioned with the emptiness he finds at the mysterious center of creation. Hemingway found his own answer to this crisis of faith with a belief in decency, bravery, and skillfulness, in spite of what he saw as the absolutely unbeatable odds waged against us all. A further part of this code is the importance of recognizing and snatching up the rare, good moments that life has to offer.

Modern Voices in Poetry: A Dazzling Period of Experimentation

By the 1920s, the last traces of British influence on American poetry were washed away, and American poets entered into their most dazzling period of experimentation. Artists and poets sought new ways of seeing and thinking. Many poets began to explore the artistic life of Europe, especially Paris, and they sought to create poems that invited new ways of seeing and thinking. Ezra Pound (page 205) and T. S. Eliot (page 209) used the suggestive techniques of **symbolism** to fashion a new, modernist poetry. Pound also was at the head of a related poetic movement called **imagism**. The imagist and symbolist styles would prevail in poetry until the mid-twentieth century.

IDENTIFY

Re-read lines 104–115. Name three characteristics of the Hemingway hero.

IDENTIFY

Pause at line 126. Circle the names of the poets who experimented with the style called **symbolism**.

COMPARE & CONTRAST

Pause at line 139. How was Robert Frost's poetry different from Eliot's and Pound's poetry?

IDENTIFY CAUSE & EFFECT

Re-read lines 142–151. How did African American poetry during the Harlem Renaissance influence American culture?

INTERPRET

Re-read lines 152–157. What still seems "modern" about Modernism?

Voices of American Character

- 130 Meanwhile other American poets rejected modernist trends. These poets stayed at home and said what they had to say in plain American speech. Their individual accents reveal the regional diversity of American life and character. Of these poets the greatest was Robert Frost (page 249). Frost's poems were written in ordinary New England speech. He had a gift for taking the most conventional poetic forms and giving them a twist all his own. Frost's ability to bring his own personality to verse resulted in a poetic voice that was unique and impossible to imitate.

The Harlem Renaissance: Voices of the African American Experience

- 140 In the early 1920s, a group of black poets focused directly on the unique contributions of African American culture to America. Their poetry based its rhythms on spirituals and jazz, its lyrics on songs known as the blues, and its diction on the street talk of the ghettos. African American lyric poets, especially Langston Hughes (page 259), brought literary distinction to the broad movement of artists known as the **Harlem Renaissance**. When African American poetry, along with music, became part of the Jazz Age, it helped usher in a new appreciation of the role of black talent in American culture.

The American Dream Revisited

The writers of the modernist era—some of the best that America has produced—experimented boldly with forms and subject matter. But they were still trying to find the answers to basic human questions: Who are we? Where are we going? What values should guide us on the search for our human identity?

**The Moderns
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Re-read lines 1–9. Underline what the modernist movement called for.

ANALYZE
Pause at line 15. Why do you think World War I and the Great Depression led Americans to examine their ideals?

Possible response:

These devastating events, which caused harm to many, many people, may have disillusioned those who lived through them.

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■ America as a New Eden
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The Great Gatsby, (1925) by F. Scott Fitzgerald.

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Mark Rothko

Collection 5

**The Moderns
(1914–1939)**

Charles Henry Demuth

Welcome to Our City (1921) by Charles Henry Demuth.
Oil on canvas (25 1/8" × 20 1/8").
Terra Foundation for the Arts, Daniel J. Terra Collection.

EVALUATE

Re-read lines 10–34. Underline the three elements of the American dream. Do you think these elements are still part of the American dream today?

Answers will vary.

Some students may say that the land is too polluted and built upon to be an Eden.

Wars, terrorism, and economic downturns may have dampened people's optimism.

Students may, however, consider that the importance of the individual is still part of the American dream.

Village Speakeasy Closed for Violation (c. 1934)
by Ben Shahn.
Tempera on masonite
(15¾" × 47½").
Museum of the City of New York, Permanent Deposit of the Public Art Fund, Inc., through the Visual Arts Program of the State of New York.
© Shahn/C. 1934 by VAGA, New York.

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Re-read lines 45–47. Locate and circle the names of two new intellectual theories or movements that sprang up following World War I.

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NIGHTHAWKS
Edward Hopper, 1942

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CAUSE & EFFECT

What effect did the interest in psychology have on narrative techniques (lines 71–77)?

The interest in psychology led to the stream-of-consciousness technique.

INTERPRET

Pause at line 85. Do you think Prohibition accomplished what its supporters had hoped? Explain.

Most students will recognize that Prohibition did not lead to a more moral or sober society.

IDENTIFY

Re-read lines 104–115. Name three characteristics of the Hemingway hero.

Possible response: The Hemingway hero is a man of action who has a code of honor and demonstrates grace under pressure.

IDENTIFY

Pause at line 126. Circle the names of the poets who experimented with the style called symbolism.

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**Grace Under Pressure:
The New American Hero**

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At Home and Abroad: The Jazz Age

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During the Jazz Age, women too played a prominent role. In 1920, women won the right to vote, and they began to create a presence in artistic, intellectual, and social circles. As energetic as this era was in America, many American artists and writers—F. Scott Fitzgerald among them—abandoned their own shores for life in France. The wave of Americans living abroad was another signal that something had gone wrong with the American dream—with the idea that America was Eden, with our belief in progress, and especially with the conviction that America was a land of heroes.

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Before You Read

The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter by Ezra Pound

LITERARY FOCUS: IMAGERY

Which of the following sentences helps you visualize the scene: "We huddled around the campfire, which hissed and crackled in the crisp night air" or "We sat in front of the campfire at night"? The first sentence uses imagery to create a vivid picture of the campfire scene. **Imagery** is language that creates vivid sensory impressions and suggests emotional states. Most images appeal to our sense of sight. However, images may also appeal to our senses of taste, smell, hearing, and touch. Imagery can also suggest emotional states, such as happiness, sadness, or anger.

Ezra Pound based "The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter" on a poem by Li Po (701–762), in tribute to the great Chinese poet. As you read the poem, notice how simple words are used to evoke vivid images.

READING SKILLS: PARAPHRASING

A **paraphrase** is a restatement of the author's ideas in your own words. Unlike a summary, which is short and includes only the most important details, a paraphrase is often as long as or longer than the original text and restates all the details. Paraphrasing is a useful skill that can help you explain complicated ideas or clarify your understanding of difficult passages. Here is a paraphrase of a poem by Emily Dickinson. Notice that the paraphrase is longer than the poem.

Poem

Fame is a bee. It has a song— It has a sting— Ah, too, it has a wing.	Fame is like a bee because it can bring joy (the bee's "song"); it can hurt (a bee's sting); and it can disappear, just as a bee can fly away.
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LITERARY SKILLS
Understand the use of imagery.
READING SKILLS
Paraphrase to clarify difficult language or a text.
REVIEW SKILLS
Understand symbolism.

The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter 205

Voices of American Character

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- INTERPRET**
Re-read lines 142–151. How did African American poetry during the Harlem Renaissance influence American culture?

The African American Poetry caused many people to admire black talent.
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Part 1 Collection 5: The Moderns

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