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I

THE UNITED STATES AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY

Program:

1. Historical, social and intellectual clues to the period
2. Literary Modernism(s) in America
 - 2.1. New myths for a new era
 - 2.2. Stylistic approaches to modernity
3. GUIDED READING: Sherwood Anderson's "Queer"
 - 3.1. Before reading
 - 3.2. During reading
 - 3.3. Questions for self-assessment

Learning objectives:

- To make a survey of the particular historical, social and intellectual conditions of the United States between the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries
- To analyze the impact of such conditions on the literary production of the nation
- To examine the phenomenon of Modernism and explore its diverse literary manifestations

1. HISTORICAL, SOCIAL AND INTELLECTUAL CLUES TO THE PERIOD

America is a nation of extremes; we ask more of experience than others and grow more disillusioned and enraged when life does not answer to our hopes.

(Edmundson: 11)

Broadly speaking, and in order to begin with a manageable sentence, it could be stated that the starting years of the twentieth century saw the rejection of former beliefs and values and the search for new ones. It goes without saying that this changing era did not start abruptly, unexpectedly demanding freshness of vision. Europe and America alike had undergone political transformations and intellectual restlessness from the second half of the nineteenth century. The United States, in particular, had been engaged in a Civil War that brought up serious social and economic changes, and were still to undergo deep transformation in their public and private affairs.

The intellectual landscape of the nineteenth century had been highly enticing, and it proved decisive for modern artistic expressions:

- Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) and *The Descent of Man* (1871) raised controversy, but they also paved the path for existential reflection: the very essence of the human being—what it meant to be human—needed reevaluation. The semi-divine and rational nature of humankind, as conceived in many works of art, suffered a severe drawback. Instead, Darwin's theories brought to the front the animal quality in the human being.
- Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* (1867) stressed the dependence of human lives on economic imperatives. History, and therefore people's lives too, was controlled by a minority who owned the means of production and distribution.

- Sigmund Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899) claimed that human behavior was shaped by an inaccessible section of ourselves. Freud stated that the unconscious is the custodian of socially unacceptable impulses and desires that must remain repressed.
- James Frazer's *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* appeared in several volumes between 1890 and 1915. In this work, the anthropologist offered an ample profile of the religious and folkloric systems held by several civilizations. Frazer's work emphasized, then, religious beliefs as cultural phenomena, and as interconnected symbolic schemes that were shared by many societies. Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* was published in 1920 and, like Frazer's study, maintained that pagan rituals had survived into modern culture.

These crucial texts coincided in the argument that human actions and personality—either particular or collective—were far from being the result of conscious effort and will. Freud and Frazer in particular disclosed the unreliability of superficial reality and rational thinking, and stressed the irrational instead. In the positivist intellectual climate of the nineteenth century, the observation and logical analysis of objective data configured thought and gnosis. But twentieth-century scientific research on matter and the universe would soon replace terms such as “causality,” “certainty” and “unity” with “probability,” “relativity” and “quantum gaps.” The 1927 Heisenberg’s “uncertainty principle” stated that it is not possible to simultaneously determine the position and momentum of a particle. Albert Einstein’s theories rendered the Newtonian physics inadequate to account for the relative properties of nature. Space and time had been conceived as separate and distinct categories and, therefore, each knowable for itself, but Einstein asserted that they must be placed on a continuum. Thus, the physical world joined human experience in the dynamic flux that resisted categorization and absolute representation. The human being and the universe, therefore, were perceived as new and were also to be grasped and explained in new terms.

Industrialization and technology, moreover, transformed life entirely in its widest scope, from domestic habits to personal relations. The Union Pacific Railroad and the Central Pacific Railroad met in Utah in 1869, thus completing the American railway system; in 1889, the first skyscraper was erected in Chicago; Henry Ford founded his company in 1903; in 1905, the first movie theater was opened in Pittsburgh. A mass society was under way, and its most accomplished representation was the assembly line. Life became faster in many aspects, among which physical

mobility became one of the most interesting for sociological and artistic reasons. To begin with, the advent of automobiles granted the Americans a machine that supplied them with imaginary power and freedom, instead of entrapping them as felt in late nineteenth-century works. In addition to this emerging mythology of car power, the technologies of rapid mobility as seen in automobiles, trains and airplanes forced a shift in the perception and understanding of time. Temporal and spatial dislocation would soon permeate the art of the first decades of the twentieth century.

The postulates of the Enlightenment, then, were being seriously interrogated and progressively abandoned. Among those that were particularly damaged were the ones concerning the coherent, knowable, and rational self, able to discern the world through reason, and capable of achieving universal and eternal truths through science. Authoritative voices and institutions, the dominant references of the rational world, characterized the pre-Modernist age. The new era, however, rejected the authority of the fallible establishments and set out to replace lost references. Similarly, Modernist authors understood the subject as fragmented in the psyche, and deconstructed its deceptive wholeness of being. On identical grounds they challenged the notion of life as a continuum that could be comprehended and represented as such. Obviously, a new mind required new methods of expression, which will be surveyed in the following Units.

If the United States had been a fragmentary, agrarian country in the nineteenth century, the turn of the century witnessed the consolidation of a nation, a world power immersed in the increasing process of industrialization and mechanization just mentioned. The first years of the century revealed the intellectuals' affirmation of an American culture. V. W. Brook's book *America's Coming of Age* (1915) can be considered a new "American Scholar" address to his generation, similar to Emerson's in the previous century, calling for an era of independent, creative living, a rejection of the irrelevant past and present to embrace a freshly assertive future. Another thinker of the time, George Santayana, claimed in 1911:

The illegitimate monopoly which the genteel tradition has established over what ought to be assumed and what ought to be hoped for has broken down. Henceforth there can hardly be the same peace and the same pleasure in hugging the old proprieties. (Quoted in Ruland and Bradbury: 270)

Another important ingredient of the new American panorama was the role of the disappearing frontier, both as economic factor and as myth, in

the expansion and consolidation of the United States. The closing of the frontier in the 1890s —more specifically, historian Frederick Jackson Turner announced such closing in 1893— implied a “running out of West,” i.e. the disappearance of an economic and psychological territory for opportunity and freedom. In his famous essay *The Frontier in American History*, Turner claimed that such had been the importance of the frontier in American history and life that its disappearance inevitably opened a new, uncertain era for the United States. Although Turner’s thesis has long been discarded, and despite the fact that it mainly referred to the economy and politics of the nation, literary critics have easily adopted its stress on individualism and opportunity as essentially American features:

- The frontier as the fundamental American myth —that is, as ideal territory where answers for personal and collective existence are provided— was in danger of extinction, mainly because the frontier used to resolve the clash between the natural, uncivilized American and civilization. At the turn of the nineteenth century, the nation was well immersed in a process of industrialization and mechanization that threatened the pastoral image that the Americans had about themselves. The following Units will explore the evolution of the myth as it hinged itself into different historical situations.
- The myth of the frontier used to be, also, articulated in gender, class and racial terms, as a masculine, middle-class and white principle. The period under observation here will witness an important progress in the conquest of rights for women and minority groups, clearly ignored by the myth before.
- The insistent advance of mechanization and technology instigated a reevaluation of the pastoral myth that had impregnated the way the Americans understood and represented themselves. The so-called American Dream had its parallel in a fantasy of the open land and of a harmonious relationship between human beings and nature (Kolodny: 4). The American literature of the twentieth century would consequently mirror the disintegration of such fantasy, and the resulting efforts to cope with its disappearance.

Part of the American process of national definition was its isolation from European and world affairs, particularly concerning World War I until the United States’ involvement in 1917. The ongoing intellectual ruin found then a counterpart in the physical ruin of people and places. The war intensified the horror and lack of confidence in institutions and metanarratives. In particular, it seriously questioned the human capacity

to organize and direct life through reason. The Enlightenment was thus forced to give way to other systems of beliefs, or at least to other attempts to shape the subject's relationship with nature, society, or the universe. Marxism came to the front in the American nineteen thirties, a time of grave social disturbances; Freudian psychology progressively became highly popular, even in literary arenas, and Catholicism became an apt option for others, like the poet Thomas Stearns Eliot.

The dissolution of America's sense of itself was already observed in the Realist and Regionalist trends of nineteenth-century literature. Characters were portrayed as trapped in a depersonalized system where their own personal decisions were useless, and where destruction was a constant menace. Materialism defied the **Jeffersonian ideal**—that is to say, an agrarian, America-as-a-virgin-land utopia where independence and individual choice were basic values. The economic landscape was changing radically, redistributing capital and creating new industrial leaders. The literary outcome of this situation was the representation of bewildered characters caught between the past and the future, between nostalgia and fear. Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, in which the character's courage and honesty provided a hopeful choice, had already exemplified this mood. However, the authors known as Naturalists would depict the moment in much less optimistic ways.

The whole sense of loss and uncertainty, and the need for spiritual relief, shaped the literature of the day. A significant part of the American literature of the twentieth century was concerned with quests, a doomed search for sense and logic in the face of a chaotic perception of experience:

The unknown appeals of brutes,
The chanting of flowers
The screams of cut trees,
The senseless babble of hens and wise men-
A cluttered incoherency that says at the stars:
'Oh, God, save us.' (From Stephen Crane's *War is Kind*, 1899)

2. LITERARY MODERNISM(S) IN AMERICA

The modern mind was not born with the twentieth century, but rather with the end of religion as organic reference of human existence. The end of the Middle Ages saw the dissolution of such a worldview, while the Renaissance witnessed the awakening of the reasoning mind. The later

period of that modernity is our field of study here, that era in which human rationality questioned itself and the world around, challenging nineteenth-century moralism and conventionality. That critical age of revision and desperate search for certainties is what we broadly call **Modernism**. It entailed a whole new conceptualization of experience, and it subsequently reshaped moral values and codes of conduct.

Diverse precise dates have been provided over the years to locate the exact birth of Modernism, such as the opening of the London Post-Impressionist Exhibition in 1910 or the beginning of the First World War in 1914. In fact, the spirit that ultimately led to the Modernist culture and to the reinvention of art was well under way in Europe in the late nineteenth century. A string of small avant-garde movements were already bringing new ideas and beliefs into visibility in the second half of the Victorian era. The emergence of American Modernism has been usually associated with the New York Cubist and Postimpressionistic exhibition of 1913. Daniel J. Singal, however, accurately observes that American poets Ezra Pound and Gertrude Stein were by then already absorbing and distilling new ideas in their European enclave (16). Similarly, American universities were engaged in the dissemination and exploration of all intellectual breakthroughs in every area of knowledge well before that date.

Due to the constellation of ideas impregnating the intellectual atmosphere of the day, manifold artists interrogated established thoughts and forms in their respective fields, from Frank Lloyd Wright's architectural designs to Mahler's later compositions, Picasso's Cubist creations, and Louis Armstrong's rhythms. All artistic endeavors searched for some kind of pattern that could restore the damaged old order. From the French Symbolists on, artists had decreased subject matter in order to explore human perception and consciousness. They deviated from Victorian compartmentalization and repression of experience, and instead highlighted the openness and continuity of life. Human experience was conceived as dynamic and fluent, so that abstract conceptualizations and absolute knowledge seemed impossible to attain—and represent. It was the art of a new world,

the one art that responds to the scenario of our chaos. It is the art consequent on Heisenberg's "Uncertainty principle", of the destruction of civilization and reason in the First World War, of the world changed and reinterpreted by Marx, Freud and Darwin, of capitalism and constant industrial acceleration, of existential exposure to meaninglessness or absurdity. It is the literature of technology. It is the art consequent on the dis-establishing of communal reality and

conventional notions of causality, on the destruction of traditional notions of wholeness of individual character, on the linguistic chaos that ensues when public notions of language have been discredited and when all realities have become subjective fictions. (Bradbury and McFarlane: 27)

The new forms of art embraced a revolt against the nineteenth-century commitment to mimesis, that is, the reproduction of reality through art as accurately as possible. In the late years of the century, the Impressionistic painters had already revolted against this conception of the artist's role and method by seeking the emotion encompassed in a scene, rather than the accurate representation of such scene. Cubism, Expressionism and other forms of non-representational expression further moved from the mimetical intention in art. Music underwent a similar reconsideration, from its classical harmonic compositions to the experiments in rhythm sought by blues and jazz musicians. Victorian dichotomies (good/bad, human/animal, man/woman, civilized/savage) and the resultant polarization and hierarchization of experience were overcome by Modernist art in its search for the expansion of consciousness and for the reunion of separate spheres of perception and emotion. By overlapping disparate fragments or planes of existence, wholeness was attempted.

Bradbury and McFarlane use the term "Modernism" in its extensive sense, as an international artistic sensibility that sprang from the European bohemia and embraced all avant-garde authors and works from 1890 to 1930. (It needs to be mentioned that Modernism coexisted—and frequently overlapped—with other art philosophies of its day such as Dada, Surrealism, or Futurism.) Singal proposes that Modernism should be seen

as a *culture*—a constellation of related ideas, beliefs, values and modes of perceptions—that came into existence during the mid to late nineteenth century, and that has had a powerful influence on art and thought on both sides of the Atlantic since roughly 1900. (7)

Other critics restrict the term to what will be labeled "High Modernism" here, that is, the trend including the most innovative authors, whose works range from about 1910 to 1930. Far from dismissing the weight of the artistic avant-garde in turn-of-the-century Europe, its interrogative spirit should be considered as the awakening of the new culture. This culture would further be outlined by the outbreak of the First World War and, in the United States, by the particular social and economic conditions that the following Units will discuss. In the present volume, the term "Modernism" will be used in its all-inclusive meaning,

containing the most radical formal manifestations as well as milder forms of interrogation of former ideas and literary practices.

Broadly speaking, the term “Modernist” comprises:

- Those who sought to emphasize the alienation and inconsistency of modern life and traditional forms of thinking, living and creating.
- The longing for unity and stability, and especially for a shared experience where the self can belong.
- In the face of decadence, the crave for values different to those of the commodified middle-class.
- The efforts to mirror the psychological processes of the human mind, unrevealed by previous modes of art.
- The challenge to the commonly-accepted notion of reality, which before was assumed to be objective, independent of the observing subject, absolute and unique.
- The urge to overthrow the moral polarization of existence, particularly in terms of class, race and gender.

Restricting the previous elements to the literary arena, and taking into consideration the multifaceted nature of the era, “Modernism” refers to those authors and literary works operating with:

- A necessity to investigate new forms and styles to convey the interrogative mood of the era. Prose and poetry question former conventions to install some freshness among the signs of decadence.
- A stress on fragmented forms and discontinuity, to the point of apparent collage, which mirrors the dissolution of beliefs in institutions and history.
- Settings and plots that evoke the past, either in an historical or individual way.
- Reevaluation and reinterpretation of myths to convey a sense of order and meaning to an increasingly meaningless existence.
- Characters in isolation and alienation who lack the energetic drive observed in the American characters of previous decades. Unmotivated or benumbed or doomed characters reflect the overwhelming power of the social and economic forces at work.
- An emphasis on the individual and the inward workings of consciousness, over the social and public domains. Technical devices