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1900-1945

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UNIT ONE
A NATION'S COMING OF AGE

Program

1. PRESENTATION: Clues to the period
 - 1.1. The United States at the turn of the century
 - 1.2. Literary Modernism(s) in America
2. TEXT ANALYSIS: Sherwood Anderson's revolt
 - 2.1. APPROACHING Anderson's «Hands»
 - 2.2. REVISITING «Hands»
3. EXERCISES

Learning outcomes

- To understand 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 as seen in Sherwood Anderson's «Hands.»

1. PRESENTATION: CLUES TO THE PERIOD

1.1. The United States at the turn of the century

Broadly speaking, the starting years of the twentieth century rejected former beliefs and values and searched for new ones. It goes without saying that this changing era did not start abruptly: Europe and America alike had undergone deep 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 initiated significant social and economic changes, and the nation was still to undergo profound 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), despite the controversy they raised, 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.
- Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* (1867) stressed the dependence of human lives on economic imperatives. According to Marx, history and people's lives were 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.
- Albert Einstein's *General Theory of Relativity* was first published in 1916. It is little coincidence that such innovative works as *The Wasteland* and *Ulysses* (1922) or *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) appeared shortly afterwards. Einstein's scheme of time, space and matter quickly took ground among intellectuals and artists alike. Particularly interesting for this volume is how writers understood and recreated the convergence of observer and observed and the space-time continuum. Space and time had been conceived in Newtonian physics 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 a dynamic flux that resisted categorization and absolute representation.
- James Frazer's *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* appeared in several volumes between 1890 and 1915. The anthropologist offered an ample profile of the religious and folkloric systems held by several civilizations. It also emphasized 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, claimed that pagan rituals had survived into modern culture.

These groundbreaking 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. The postulates of the Enlightenment, then, were being seriously interrogated and progressively abandoned. Among those 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 and gnosis. 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 the 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 line that could be comprehended and represented as such. 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 see concepts like «probability,» «relativity» and «quantum gaps» replacing positivist terms such as «causality,» «certainty» and «wholeness.» Additionally, the 1927 Heisenberg's «uncertainty principle» stated that it is not possible to simultaneously determine the position and momentum of a particle, which would highly shape the representation of people and events in literature. Human beings and their environment, therefore, were understood under new conditions 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 provided Americans with a machine that entailed mythical power and freedom, instead of entrapping them like the machines represented 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 United States had been a fragmentary, agrarian country in the nineteenth century, but 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 Ralph Waldo 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 disappearing frontier in its double role: as economic factor and as myth. 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. Its imprint on twentieth-century life and culture, consequently, cannot be overlooked. To begin with, 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» (both terms should be used with