The Modern Period

1914–1945

World War I begins.  World War II ends.

- The United States, an isolationist nation before World War I (called the Great War by contemporaries), was characterized by significant tension between political isolationism and international involvement during the postwar period.

- As the country became increasingly isolationist, American authors marched to the beat of a different drummer. They exhibited a growing interest in European authors, including the seventeenth century English metaphysical poets, the French Symbolists of the nineteenth century (who had themselves been influenced by the American writer Edgar Allan Poe), and writers of their own times, such as Irish expatriate author James Joyce.

- American writers of the period who felt disillusioned by the experience and aftermath of World War I quickly came to be termed the “Lost Generation.” These writers generally viewed the “traditional” American values of their youth as a sham and rejected American culture as hypocritical, given the senselessness of the war and its devaluation of human life.
  - Their works reflected the pervasive sense of loss, disillusionment, and despair in the wake of the Great War.
  - They sought to break away from tradition through experimentation with new literary devices and styles and challenged conventional ways of life.
  - Their desire to break with tradition and their feeling that traditional literary conventions were no longer sufficient to reflect and make sense of their emotions and the drastically altered state of the world prompted modernist writers to experiment with form, syntax, and structure, creating works that are non-linear and non-traditional in discourse, narration, and overall structure.
  - Many, including Gertrude Stein (around whom the others gathered), F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, e. e. cummings, Sherwood Anderson, and William Slater Brown, even became expatriates in Europe during the 1920s.


- The Harlem Renaissance – Flourishing during the 1920s, the Harlem Renaissance was the first time in American history that African American culture was deliberately highlighted for a diverse national audience via literature, theater, music, and dance.
  - The Harlem Renaissance was centered in the almost exclusively African American area of Harlem in New York City.
  - This period marked one of the high points of the Modern Period in American Literature.
  - Arna Bontemps, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and Jean Toomer are just a few figures associated with the Harlem Renaissance.