6.1: Introduction

Since the end of the Second World War to the present day, the people of the United States of America have witnessed the incredible economic and technological growth of their nation into a global cultural and military superpower. These years of growth also have often been times of radical cultural transformation, during which the nation reassessed its traditions. Americans in this period lived through times of war and times of peace, decades of cultural conformity and decades of social revolt. For the first two decades of this period, Americans lived in a racially segregated nation; they now live in a multicultural nation that has twice elected a black president. For much of this period, Americans lived in a world of ideologically warring superpowers poised on the brink of nuclear annihilation; they now live in a world intimately connected by massive computer networks and a complex global economy, yet one still riven by dangerous religious and economic disputes. In popular culture, Americans’ tastes in music have moved from jazz and rock and roll to hip-hop and electronic music. In the visual arts, Americans have seen the explosive canvases of abstract expressionists such as Jackson Pollock become the Campbell’s Soup cans of pop artists such as Andy Warhol and then the video screens of cable television’s MTV and multimedia artists on YouTube. Their art and entertainment have come to them increasingly through technologies, starting with film and radio, then television, and now the Internet. In the literature of this amazingly transformative era, we find a record of how the nation has known, questioned, and even redefined itself.

When the United States ended the Second World War by dropping atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the nation was well positioned to assume a role of global leadership. While the cities and factories of both its enemies Germany and Japan and its allies Britain and the Soviet Union were destroyed in the war, the continental U.S. was never attacked. The American industries that won the war quickly retooled to win the peace, selling cars, radios, and washing machines within an increasingly global economy and ushering in an era of unparalleled American prosperity. The United States government spent tens of billions of dollars in foreign aid to rebuild its former enemies Germany and Japan, ensuring that they would be both economic and military allies in the future. The **GI Bill** paid for an unprecedented number of young American men to attend colleges and buy homes, creating a huge professional middle class eager to work for the nation’s mighty high-tech corporations and live in its swiftly growing new suburbs. The
decade and a half following the Second World War is often called the age of conformity, as the nation’s large, college-educated middle class embraced the values of the nuclear family and sought happiness, after years of desperate war, in their society’s newfound abundance of consumer goods.

Yet the peace was short lived, and there was dissent at home. In the midst of this postwar era of prosperity, Allen Ginsberg composed his great poem “Howl,” in which he lambasted the nation’s conformist culture for destroying its best and brightest citizens. Authors of the Beat movement of the 1950s such as Ginsberg celebrated America’s countercultures and sought to free literature from traditional formalism and align it more closely with the improvisatory musical solos of jazz, the spontaneous drips and splashes of abstract expressionist action painting, and the everyday utterances of the American street. Storytellers of the second wave of the Southern Renaissance resisted America’s culture of conformity and embraced their distinctive regionality, with Georgia author Flannery O’Connor lamenting in her essay, “The Fiction Writer and His Country,” that the traditional American South was “getting more and more like” the rest of the materialistic, money-hungry nation. Poets during this period, such as Theodore Roethke and Sylvia Plath, began sharing intimate, sometimes disturbing details from their lives in a newly confessional mode of poetry that showed how the nuclear family could be a source of stress as well as stability, ultimately showing the nation how the personal situation of the writer could represent the politics of the nation as a whole.

On the world stage, the Soviet Union organized the Eastern European nations it had conquered during the Second World War into a political bloc dedicated to Russian-led state socialism under which the state owns all businesses and administers all social services as opposed to American-led free-market capitalism, under which private individuals own all businesses. The former allies found themselves competing for the hearts and minds of the world over the value of their respective social systems. When the Soviet Union tested its own atomic bomb in 1949, the U.S. and the Soviet Union entered into a conflict called the Cold War. The two enemies proceeded to build tens of thousands of nuclear weapons over the following decades to deter each from attacking the other, accumulating enough atomic bombs to destroy human civilization many times over. The U.S. committed itself to a policy of Soviet containment, checking the influence of the so-called red menace abroad through foreign aid and limited military action, and prosecuting American artists and activists with leftist sympathies at home through such venues as the House Un-American Activities Committee. Some of the authors in this chapter had their careers curtailed during this fearful period because of their political beliefs, as when poet William Carlos Williams was stripped of his consultancy to the Library of Congress in 1952 for once having written a poem titled “Russia.”

In addition to grappling with the threats of nuclear war and the red menace, Americans at this time were also grappling with the homegrown injustice of racial segregation. Up until 1965, Americans in many states lived under Jim Crow laws that disenfranchised African-Americans, keeping black American citizens socially separate from and legally inferior to white citizens. The civil rights and black power movements of the 1950s and 60s, led by Dr. Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, increasingly showed the nation that the experience of its prosperous, college-educated white middle class was not the experience of all Americans. The often-violent struggle to desegregate America was televisied across the nation, unifying the country within a new television culture in the very act of displaying its deep ideological divisions. The works in this chapter by Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, and Ralph Ellison present a good record of what life was like in segregated America and during the civil rights movement.

In 1963, American President John F. Kennedy was assassinated. In 1974, another American president, Richard M. Nixon, resigned from office in disgrace. The tumultuous decade in between these two events is known as the Sixties. During this decade, America was fighting a seemingly endless war of containment in Vietnam. Students on college
campuses protested the war and the policies of their own government. Urban populations rioted against racism and economic disparity. Artists and intellectuals radically reassessed America’s prosperous postwar era as a culture of one-dimensional organization men trapped in skyscrapers and servile women trapped by what feminist critic Betty Friedan called the feminine mystique. Led by author-activists such as Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem, women in the 1960s and ’70s launched a second wave of feminist political activity, demanding full social and economic equality with men. Poets such as Adrienne Rich embodied the radical politics of their era, composing feminist poems, such as the one by her included in this chapter.

America returned to a Cold War culture of conformity in the decade preceding the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Yet the changes the Sixties had wrought in the nation’s culture were permanent. From the time of the civil rights movement to the present day, American writers have increasingly come to see the U.S. as being home to several different kinds of Americans African-Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans, Straight Americans, Queer Americans each with their own unique experience of life in America. The civil rights and feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s were followed by the gay rights and multicultural movements of the 1980s, 1990s, and early twenty-first century. Western culture itself became more welcoming of difference after the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War as the nations of Europe cast aside millennia of enmities and joined in a European Union, sharing a common currency, the Euro, and a common economic fate. While the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 illustrated how economically and technologically connected the world had become, they also drove home how socially and ideologically divided it remains in the early twenty-first century.

America’s growing multicultural sensibility and tolerance of diversity has been both empowering and challenging, reflecting new kinds of political identity that often conflict with Americans’ senses of who they are. Beholding the diversity within America, authors of the 1960s once worried about the “death of the novel.” It no longer felt possible for a single story to represent the American experience as a whole. Back in 1949, Arthur Miller’s salesman Willy Loman in his play, Death of a Salesman, could stand on stage as an American Everyman dreaming the American dream. Yet Willy’s life is far from representative of every life in America, starting with the lives of every American woman and extending to every member of an American minority. American authors of the following decades began to represent America multiculturally as a nation of indigenous peoples and immigrants from other lands. The short stories by Alice Walker and Leslie Marmon Silko are good examples of multicultural literature. Silko draws specifically on her Native American heritage while Alice Walker shows us the tensions that arise as her characters negotiate an identity that is grounded in both Africa and America.

The changes that the nation has undergone since 1945 have often been disorienting, a disorientation that is reflected in Donald Barthleme’s story, also found in this chapter, “The School,” in which the reader struggles to make sense of all the odd and terrible things that happen in Barthleme’s average American school. The United States has remained an economic and cultural global superpower since 1945, but the politics of both the nation and the world during this time have been radically in flux, seeing the rise and fall of global empires, the emergence of new social justice movements, and the creation of new senses of national identity. Science and technology, so important to winning the Second World War, have penetrated more and more parts of American society. The computer has been the most influential invention of the era, changing the way Americans both work and play. The media of the book, radio, and film have been joined by the new media of the television and computer screen, giving Americans since 1945 an overwhelming variety of often contradictory ways to know themselves, their fellow citizens, and their world.

With so many media in which to see, know, and communicate with one another, Americans in the final decades of the
twentieth century developed a growing sense of the “textuality” of experience, the recognition that their lives are increasingly lived through signs and images seen on life’s many screens, that videos and computer simulations have become an indispensable part of, and perhaps have even taken the place of, their reality. This sensibility is reflected in the transition from literary modernism to Postmodernism during this period. You will read more about this transition later in this chapter. Postmodernist authors such as Barthleme playfully use all the experimental literary techniques developed by the modernists in the first half of the century to represent the many lives Americans live in the century’s second half and beyond. The characters in Don DeLillo’s 1985 postmodernist novel *White Noise* anticipate the twenty-first century’s obsession with social media as they realize that the many photographs of “the most photographed barn in America” are more real than the actual barn being photographed. David Foster Wallace’s “maximalist” essay “Consider the Lobster” likewise represents the information overload Americans experience in the twenty-first century, his many footnotes creating a hyperlinked, postmodern style of prose that reflects the superabundance of information available on the Internet.

American literature since 1945 has seen the rise of countercultural Beats and the confessional poets. It contains the voices of radical feminists, conservative regionalists, and proud multiculturalists. It presides over the reinvention of America as its modernist storytellers of one American experience now stand beside the postmodernist storytellers of many American experiences. In all these ways and more, the American writers who lived through the extraordinary era since 1945 present us with an insightful record of what their nation and its people once were, of what they are, and of what they may become.