

Contemporary Literature: Historical Context

KEY IDEAS Literature of the modern age reflects the uncertainty and anxiety brought on by the realities of war.

Modern Warfare

WORLD WAR II “Not a place on earth might be so happy as America,” wrote Thomas Paine in the winter of 1776. “Her situation is remote from all the wrangling world.” More than a century and a half later, as the Nazi army surged across Europe and Japan’s expansionist government seized territories in Asia, many Americans still clung to the dream of isolationism—until **Pearl Harbor** woke them from their illusions.

On December 7, 1941, Japanese bombers struck the American naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, sinking ships, destroying planes, and killing over two thousand people. Though it lasted less than two hours, this surprise attack changed the course of history, bringing a reluctant United States into World War II.

The U.S. entry into the war turned the tide in favor of the Allies—England, France, and the Soviet Union—but it was a long, hard fight. By the time Germany and Japan surrendered to the Allied forces in 1945, more than 78 million people had been killed or wounded, including around six million Jews systematically murdered by the Nazis in what became known as the **Holocaust**. World War II was a catastrophe of epic dimensions, the first war in history in which more civilians than soldiers died. Never before had so many soldiers fought. Never before had such wholesale slaughter occurred. Writers such as **Randall Jarrell**, who had personal experience with the war, struggled to both document and examine the meaning of war on such a grand scale. Others, such as **Kurt Vonnegut** and **Bernard Malamud**, examined the rampant anti-Semitism that fueled the Holocaust. Malamud once remarked, “People say I write so much about misery, but you write about what you write best. As you are grooved, so you are grieved.”

THE COLD WAR America came out of World War II a world power, wielding a new weapon of unparalleled destructive force: the atomic bomb. But along with strength and influence came deep uneasiness. The Soviet Union, once an ally, emerged as a rival superpower with equally large ambitions and a political system—communism—which many saw as a threat to the American way of life. Knowing any direct confrontation could end in nuclear annihilation, the two nations fought a “Cold War,” each side racing to develop more and more devastating weapons while they jostled for strategic influence around the globe. As the arms race spiraled upward, ordinary citizens felt less and less secure. In literature, this pervasive fear of known and unknown dangers prompted a boom in **science fiction** writing, as writers pondered what might arise if the current trends continued.



SUNSHINE STATE STANDARDS

Literary Analysis

Benchmark LA.1112.2.1.8 Explain how ideas, values, and themes of a literary work often reflect the historical period in which it was written.

Benchmark LA.1112.2.2.3 Organize information to show understanding or relationships among facts, ideas, and events (e.g., representing key points within text through charting, mapping, paraphrasing, summarizing, comparing, contrasting, outlining).

TAKING NOTES

Outlining As you read this introduction, use an outline to record the main ideas about the characteristics and literature of the period. You can use article headings, boldfaced terms, and the information in these boxes as starting points. (See page R49 in the **Research Handbook** for more help with outlining.)

1. Historical Context

A. World War II

1. isolationism

2. Pearl Harbor

3. Holocaust

B. Cold War



ADDITIONAL BACKGROUND

For more on the contemporary period, visit the **Literature Center** at ClassZone.com.

MODERN CONFLICTS Meanwhile, in an effort to contain the spread of communism, the U.S. military became deeply involved in civil wars first in Korea, then in Vietnam. The longest war in American history, the **Vietnam War** lasted over 20 years and bred a degree of domestic conflict unseen since the Civil War. As the death toll among U.S. soldiers rose—reaching about 58,000 in all—many Americans questioned the wisdom of our intervention and took to the streets in protest. The literature of the time reflects the conflicts within the country. Writer **Tim O'Brien** once remarked that “It’s not really Vietnam that I was concerned about . . . ; rather, it was to have readers care about what’s right and wrong and about the difficulty of doing right, the difficulty of saying no to a war.”

The Cold War finally came to an end with the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, but America was not finished with warfare. That same year, U.S. troops were sent to counter the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in the first Persian Gulf War. A longer struggle began on September 11, 2001, when hijackers flew commercial airplanes into the Pentagon and the World Trade Center, killing thousands and leading to U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. At the same time, violence raged around the globe, and with nuclear weapons no longer limited to two superpowers, possibilities for worldwide disaster loomed. Writers of the last several generations have been profoundly affected by the sense of instability that has been brought on by near-constant war. “At all times,” wrote novelist **John Updike**, “an old world is collapsing and a new world arising.”

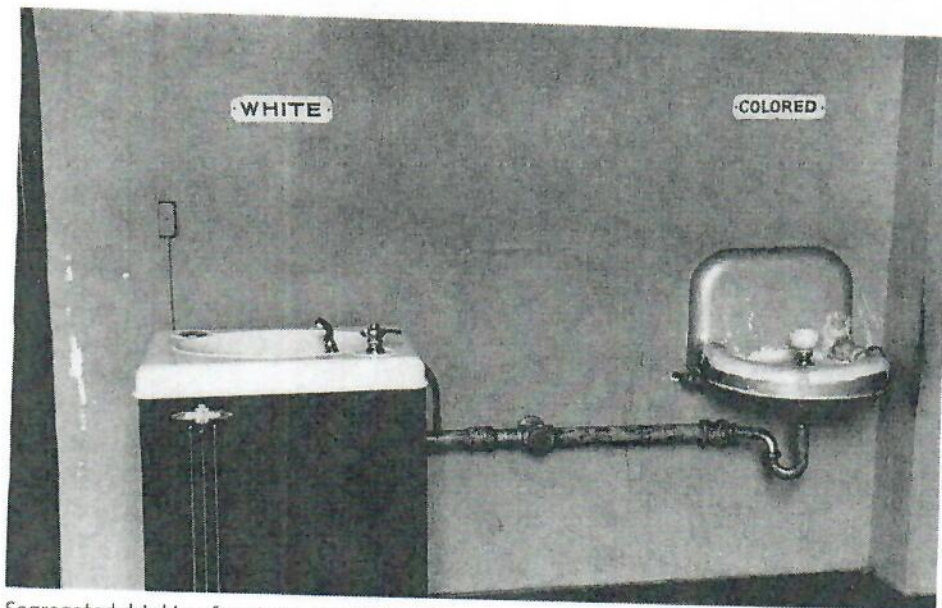
A Voice from the Times

Mankind must put an end to war, or war will put an end to mankind.

—John F. Kennedy

U.S. Marines training for Operation Desert Shield, 1990





Segregated drinking fountains, North Carolina

Cultural Influences

KEY IDEAS Writers have both recorded and reflected upon the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s—perhaps the most important social change in modern time.

The Civil Rights Movement

The civil rights movement had its roots in protests and legal actions of the 1950s. In 1954, the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling struck down school segregation as unconstitutional. Other civil rights advances followed, pushed along by black and white activists who organized protest marches, boycotts, voter registration drives, and sit-ins. **Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.** emerged as a leader during these times. King advocated nonviolent civil disobedience based on the philosophies of Henry David Thoreau and Indian social reformer Mohandas Gandhi.

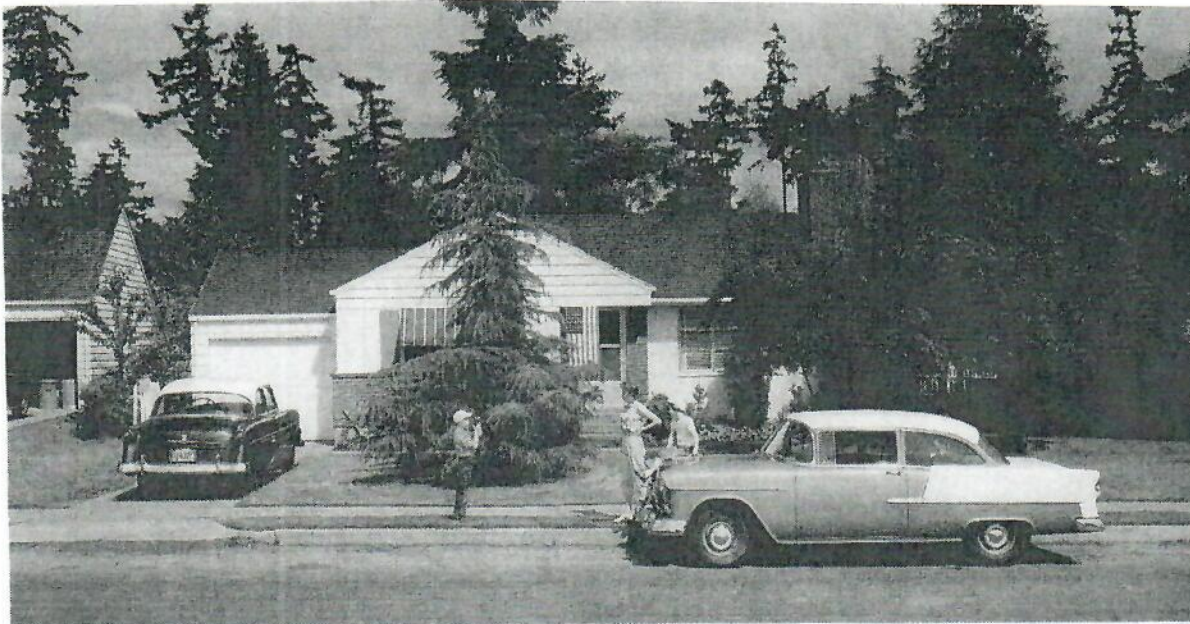
Sadly, many of the peaceful demonstrations of the civil rights movement were met with mob violence and police brutality. While the nation watched on television, protestors were beaten, attacked by police dogs, and sprayed with fire hoses. King himself endured repeated imprisonment for his efforts. But the violence did not stop the movement.

During the famous March on Washington in 1963, which drew 200,000 participants, demonstrators demanded civil rights legislation at the national level, backed strongly by federal enforcement. Largely as a result of King's efforts, Congress passed the 1964 **Civil Rights Act** outlawing segregation in public places and guaranteeing legal equality to black citizens. In the years since, America has still not achieved true equality and opportunity for all, yet the civil rights movement has brought it much closer to King's dream of a land where people would "not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character."

A Voice from the Times

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."

—Martin Luther King Jr.



Seattle-area neighborhood, 1955

Ideas of the Age

KEY IDEAS Modern writers have responded in a variety of ways to a peculiarly American philosophy: that of the American dream.

The American Dream

For earlier generations, the **American dream** had meant many things—political and religious freedom, economic opportunity, the chance to achieve a better life through talent, education, and hard work. After living through the Great Depression and two World Wars, however, many Americans in the 1950s whittled that dream down to something much simpler: the chance to own a home in a stable neighborhood.

For millions of mainly white Americans, life in the suburbs became the American dream. Families sought out communities with affordable single-family homes, good schools, shopping malls, and parking that was free and easy to find. People didn't care if their houses looked alike; they just wanted a safe place to raise their children.

As the years passed and the economy boomed, however, Americans began to add to their once-simple dream. *Things* became more important: a new television, car, or washing machine came to be seen as symbols of success. Soon the dream seemed to narrow to a vision of a consumer society in which conformity and “keeping up with the Joneses” was valued above all.

Writers from the mid-century to today have wrangled with the idea of the American dream. In the mid-'50s, “beatniks” such as **Jack Kerouac** and **Allen Ginsberg** protested the shallowness and conformity of American society. Dramatists such as **Arthur Miller** examined the strivings of ordinary Americans reaching for that American dream. Poets, novelists, short story writers—all have explored the many facets of the American dream.

Literature of the Times

KEY IDEAS The years between World War II and the present brought dramatic changes in the subjects and forms of literature, as well as a wider variety of authors represented.

Modern American Drama

In the years following World War II, some of the best and most influential writing was occurring within the community of American theater. Dramatists in the post-war years began to experiment stylistically and create works of social relevance that would prompt a revival in theater not only in America, but in Europe as well. Dramatists such as Arthur Miller and **Tennessee Williams** served as models of the liberated playwright—experimenting with stagecraft as well as modern themes often deemed provocative.

One of the most common themes explored by these playwrights was that of the American dream. “The American dream is the largely unacknowledged screen in front of which all American writing plays itself out,” Arthur Miller once said. Indeed, Miller’s Willy Loman, the main character in his *Death of a Salesman*, became the trademark figure of postwar American theater. A lowly salesman who has been discarded by the system to which he has mistakenly devoted his life, Willy Loman proved how the American dream could become twisted and broken.

A general disillusionment paired with an experimental style characterized many of the works of this period. While a play such as **Thornton Wilder’s** *Our Town*, first produced in 1938, experimented with stagecraft by showing life literally “behind the scenes” on a stage bare of scenery, it still took a gentle view of small-town America. Works written in the 1940s and 1950s, however, were far less sympathetic. In *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*, for example, Southerner Tennessee Williams portrayed characters who, unsuited to modern life, retreat into the fantasy world of an earlier era. And Miller’s critique of modern values in *Death of a Salesman* was found to be so threatening that Hollywood executives wanted to release the movie version along with a short film depicting the life of a salesman as blissful and carefree. Miller, however, protested.

Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*, written in 1957, looked at the American dream from the perspective of those who had been excluded. The first major Broadway play by an African-American writer, *A Raisin in the Sun* was hailed by critics as “universal,” while also capturing unique aspects of the African-

► For Your Outline

MODERN AMERICAN DRAMA

- postwar revival in theater
- common theme was American dream
- characterized by disillusionment and experimental style
- broke boundaries and opened doors



Vivien Leigh and Marlon Brando in *A Streetcar Named Desire*

American experience. Writer **James Baldwin** said of the play, “[I]n order for a person to bear his life, he needs a valid re-creation of that life, which is why, as Ray Charles might put it, blacks chose to sing the blues. This is why *Raisin in the Sun* meant so much to black people . . . In the theater, a current flowed back and forth between the audience and the actors, flesh and blood corroborating flesh and blood—as we say, testifying. . . .” In addition, the play opened the door to writers from outside the mainstream, who would revitalize American theater in the decades to follow.

A Voice from the Times

One of the most sound ideas in dramatic writing is that, in order to create the universal, you must pay very great attention to the specific.

—Lorraine Hansberry

Responses to War

War, with all its moral complexities and attendant brutality, has had a strong influence on writers throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. World War II brought with it previously unimaginable horrors: millions of casualties, the genocide of the Holocaust, the use of nuclear weapons. Struggling to come to terms with such destruction, some writers worked in the **modernist** style—giving detailed, realistic, and somewhat detached accounts of the war, as if told by an outside observer such as a journalist.

In fact, much of the most powerful literature of World War II was straight nonfiction, such as war correspondent **John Hersey’s** *Hiroshima*, an unforgettable account of the first hours and days after the United States dropped atomic bombs on two Japanese cities, bringing massive destruction and an end to the war. **John Steinbeck**, better known for his Depression-era literature, worked as a war correspondent as well, spending time with troops in North Africa and England. His essay “Why Soldiers Won’t Talk” explores how soldiers cope with the things they have witnessed.

Many writers of this period wrote of their own experiences—including the horrors of the Holocaust. **Elie Wiesel**, who was born in Europe and became an American citizen much later in life, was taken as a 15-year-old boy to a Nazi concentration camp in Poland. His memoir, *Night*, describes his nightmarish experiences in the camp, where he was beaten, starved, and nearly worked to death. Most members of his family did not survive.

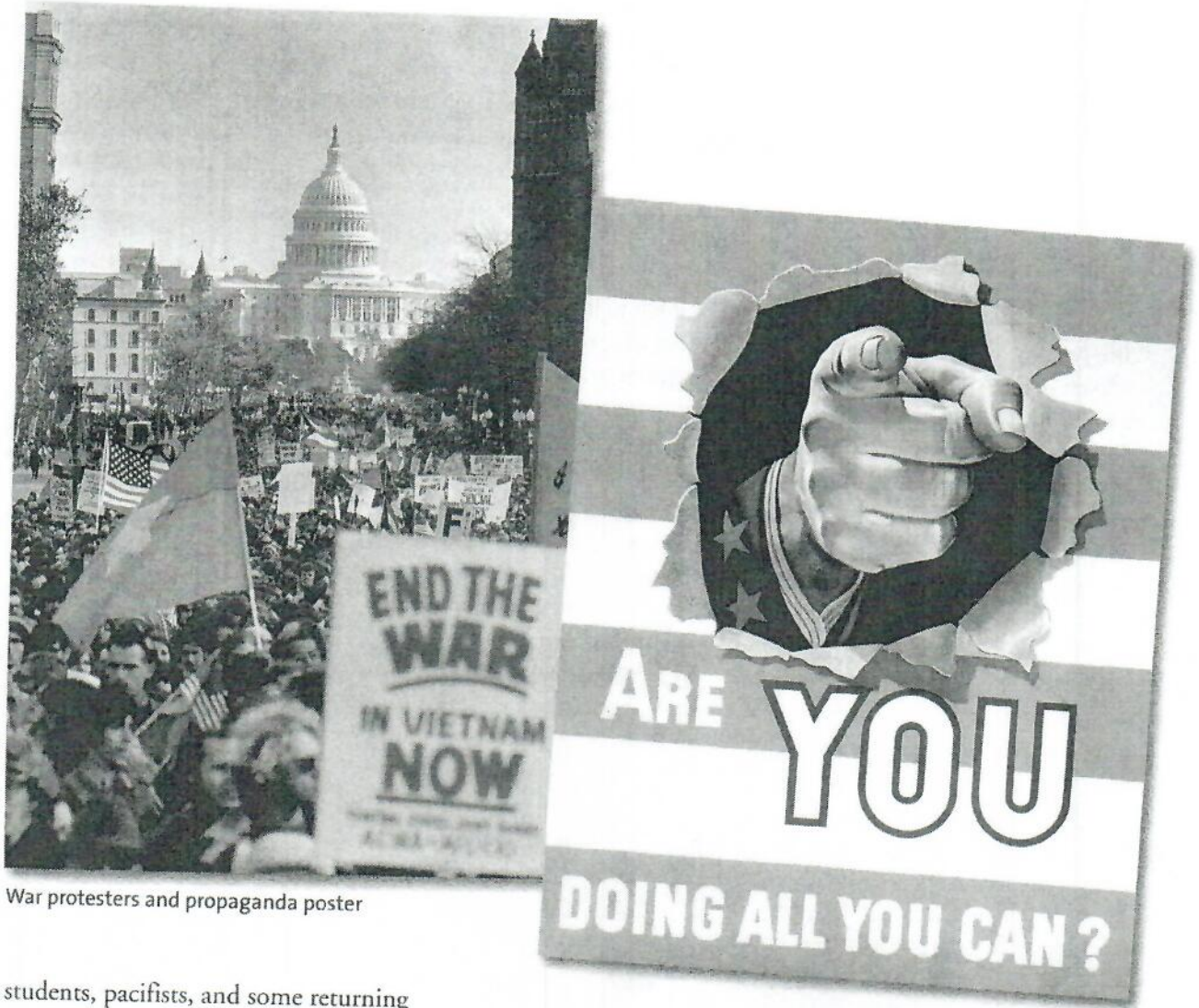
In the 1960s, **Joseph Heller’s** *Catch-22* and **Kurt Vonnegut’s** *Slaughterhouse-Five* introduced a new style of war literature. Both writers had seen combat in World War II, and their novels shared a dark, ironic humor that focused on the absurdity of war. One such absurdity is the “catch” in *Catch-22*. It refers to a mysterious Air Force regulation which asserts that any person willing to go into battle should be considered insane, yet the very act of asking to be excused would prove one’s sanity—and send a pilot back into battle. With their cynicism toward authority and sense of helplessness in the face of huge, inhuman forces, Heller and Vonnegut spoke to a younger generation caught up in a very different war: Vietnam.

Where World War II had united Americans in moral certainty against a common enemy, Vietnam drove them apart. Protesters—among them

► For Your Outline

RESPONSES TO WAR

- war influenced 20th- and 21st- century writers
- some worked in modernist style
- others wrote powerful nonfiction
- later focus is on absurdity of war
- postmodern style questioned conventions
- some blurred line between fiction and nonfiction



War protesters and propaganda poster

students, pacifists, and some returning veterans—marched in the streets, calling for an end to the war.

Writers of this time questioned authority, conventional values, and even the nature of reality. Some experimented with a “postmodern” style of fiction that drew attention to its own artificiality, pointing out the presence of the author by displaying its inner workings like a clock without a face. Others, like Vietnam veteran Tim O’Brien, wrote stories that blurred the lines between fiction and nonfiction. In *The Things They Carried*, O’Brien writes about telling his daughter how he killed a man in Vietnam—but this Tim O’Brien is a character, and the real O’Brien neither killed a man nor has a daughter. Can something that “didn’t really happen” still be true? Postmodernism asks, What is fiction? What is truth?

ANALYZE VISUALS

The World War II propaganda poster shown here was meant to inspire support for the war. In your opinion, is it persuasive? How might the Vietnam War protesters shown in the other image have answered the question posed? How might they have responded to the intent of the poster?

Civil Rights and Protest Literature

The questioning of authority and conventional values applied not only to the writers of the Vietnam era but to those of the civil rights movement as well. To change laws, first it was necessary to change minds. The success of the civil rights movement depended on getting the message of justice out to the rest of America—telling people what was happening and making them care. One hundred years before, abolitionist writers had made a deep impact with novels and slave narratives that showed readers how it felt to live in bondage. In the 20th century, the written word still had a crucial role to play.

Even before the civil rights movement began in earnest, writers were examining issues of race and equality. Building upon the work of earlier Harlem Renaissance writers, black writers of the 1940s explored the dynamics of race relations and the injustice of discrimination in novels such as **Ann Petry's** *The Street*, which sold over a million copies, and **Richard Wright's** *Native Son*. As the civil rights movement gathered momentum in the early 1950s, African-American writers began to gain wider recognition, winning prestigious awards such as the Pulitzer Prize for poet **Gwendolyn Brooks** and the National Book Award for **Ralph Ellison's** *Invisible Man*.

The 1960s brought **James Baldwin's** influential essay collections as well as many important autobiographies, including *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and **Anne Moody's** *Coming of Age in Mississippi*. By telling their own stories, these writers made a powerful statement about the harmful effects of racism and the need for change. Poets chimed in as well, reflecting upon the powerful events of the day. **Dudley Randall's** "Ballad of Birmingham," for example, was in response to the 1963 church bombing that killed four young girls.

► For Your Outline

CIVIL RIGHTS AND PROTEST LITERATURE

- questioned authority and tradition
- delivered message of justice
- examined race and equality
- reflected African-American experience
- showed varying viewpoints

A MOSAIC OF AMERICAN VOICES

- current outpouring from writers of various ethnicities
- new appreciation for diversity
- universal themes, yet rooted in culture



A Voice from the Times

*We are not fighting for integration,
nor are we fighting for separation.
We are fighting for recognition as
human beings.*

—Malcolm X

Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X

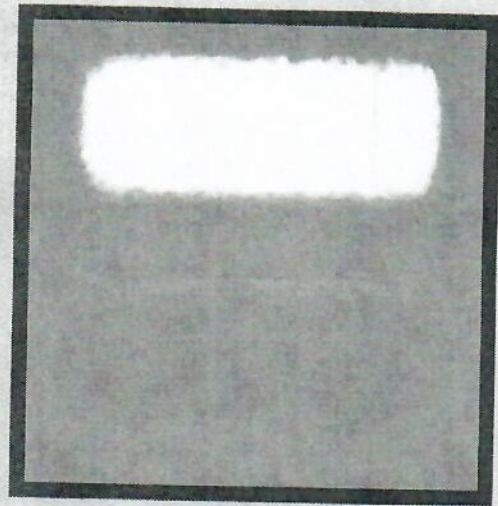
Malcolm X and **Martin Luther King Jr.**, two leaders of the civil rights movement, held opposing viewpoints on the use of violence as a means for change. Inspired by Thoreau and Gandhi, as well as the Bible, King's speeches and writings combined a steadfast belief in nonviolent resistance with a bold determination to bring an end to injustice. In his 1963 "I Have a Dream" speech, King argued, "Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred. We must forever conduct our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline. We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence." Malcolm X, on the other hand, advocated the use of militant armed resistance as a response to discrimination. "I *am* for violence," he said, "if nonviolence means we continue postponing a solution to the black man's problem—just to *avoid* violence." Their writings give readers insight into the various, and sometimes opposing, factions that made up the civil rights movement.

A Mosaic of American Voices

The last 30 years have seen an outpouring of talent from American writers of many different ethnic backgrounds, along with an increasingly widespread appreciation of diversity. Just a few decades ago, the literary scene was still dominated almost exclusively by men of European descent. Now, they have been joined by Native American writers such as **N. Scott Momaday** and **Louise Erdrich**, Asian-American writers such as **Maxine Hong Kingston** and **Amy Tan**, Hispanic writers such as **Rudolfo Anaya** and **Sandra Cisneros**, and African-American writers such as **Alice Walker**, **Rita Dove**, **Toni Morrison**, and **Maya Angelou**, to name just a few. Many of the most exciting contemporary writers are women; many, too, such as **Bharati Mukherjee** and **Edwidge Danticat**, were born outside the United States and bring a global perspective to American literature.

While earlier writers of color often focused on the experience of discrimination, writers today draw on different aspects of life in America, positive and negative, from family memories and relationships to contemporary politics. With such a broad array of published voices, no longer is any one author assumed to speak for all people of a given group. Instead, the most compelling work of today's literary marketplace is both expressive of the individual and rooted in culture and place, while still managing to speak to universal human concerns. American literature has changed, again, and will continue to evolve as long as writers continue to write.

THE ARTISTS' GALLERY



Modern American Art

The power shift from Europe to the United States in the years after World War II had a parallel in the world of art. For the first time, international attention focused not on Paris's salon or London's Royal Academy but on the studios and galleries of New York City.

Abstract Expressionism During the 1940s and 1950s, a group of artists including **Mark Rothko** and **Jackson Pollock** dominated the New York art scene. Their style was abstract, intensely emotional, and focused as much on the process of painting as on the work itself. Jackson Pollock, who was famous for laying a giant canvas on the floor and throwing paint on it, described his art as "energy and motion made visible." Mark Rothko's signature style—floating rectangles of color aligned vertically against a colored background—is illustrated beautifully in his work *White Cloud Over Purple* (1957), shown here.

Pop Art In the early 1960s, a very different kind of art burst into public view. Pop art used familiar images from consumer culture to ask the question *What is art?* From **Andy Warhol**, with his silkscreened movie stars and soup cans, to **Roy Lichtenstein's** enormous blow-ups of comic strip panels, pop art celebrated modern methods of production while it subtly undermined the barrage of messages shaping Americans' attitudes and everyday lives.