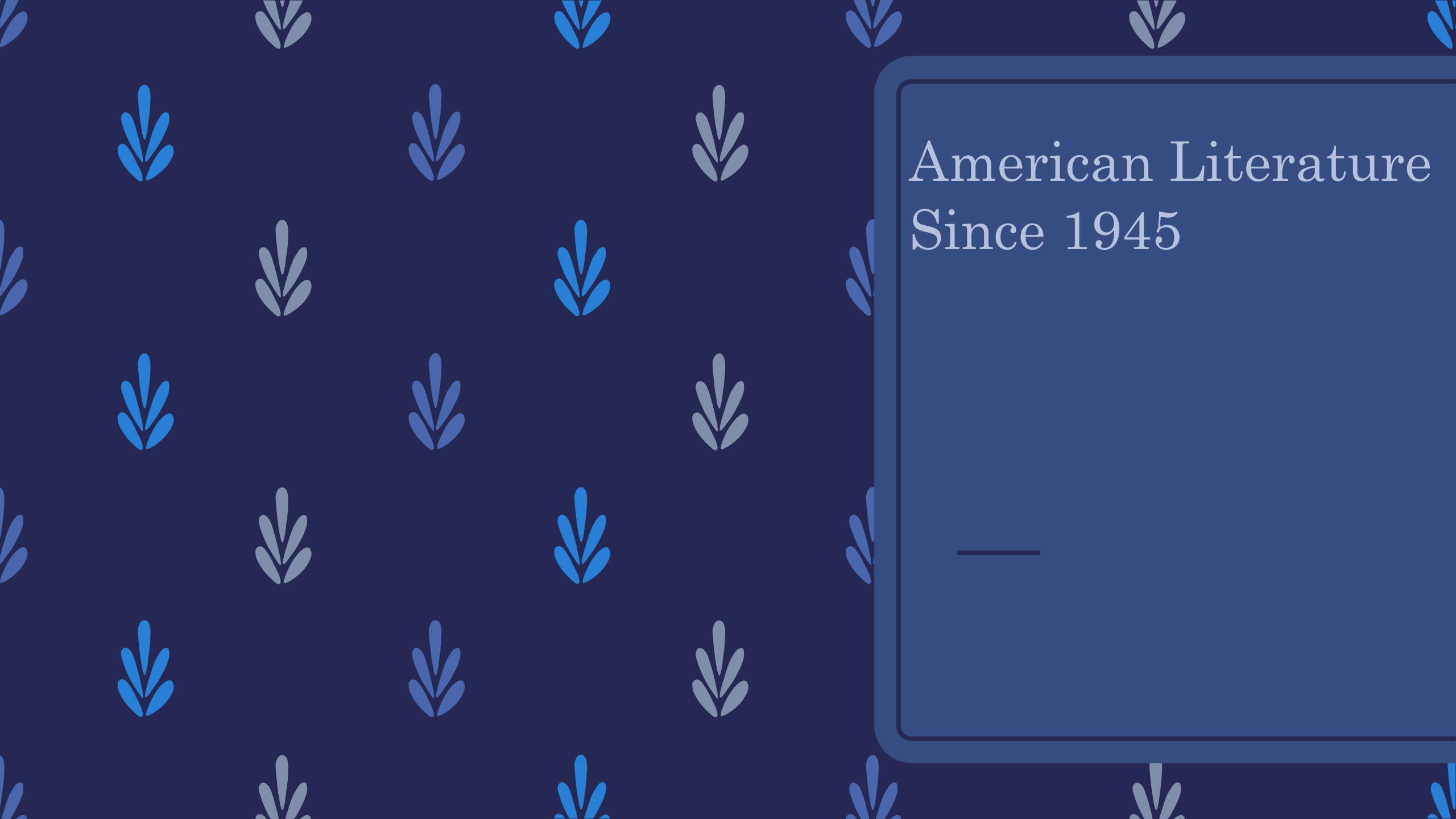




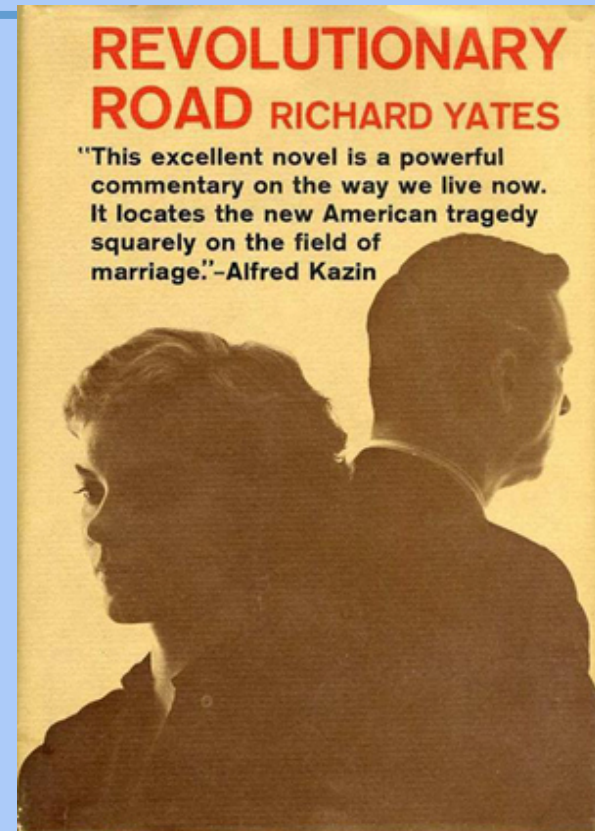
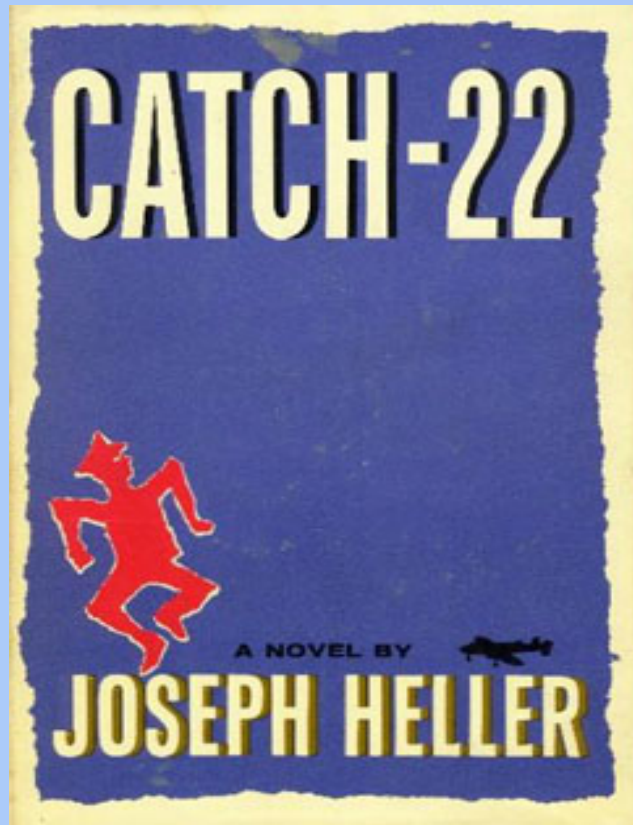
American Literature Since 1945

Literary Developments

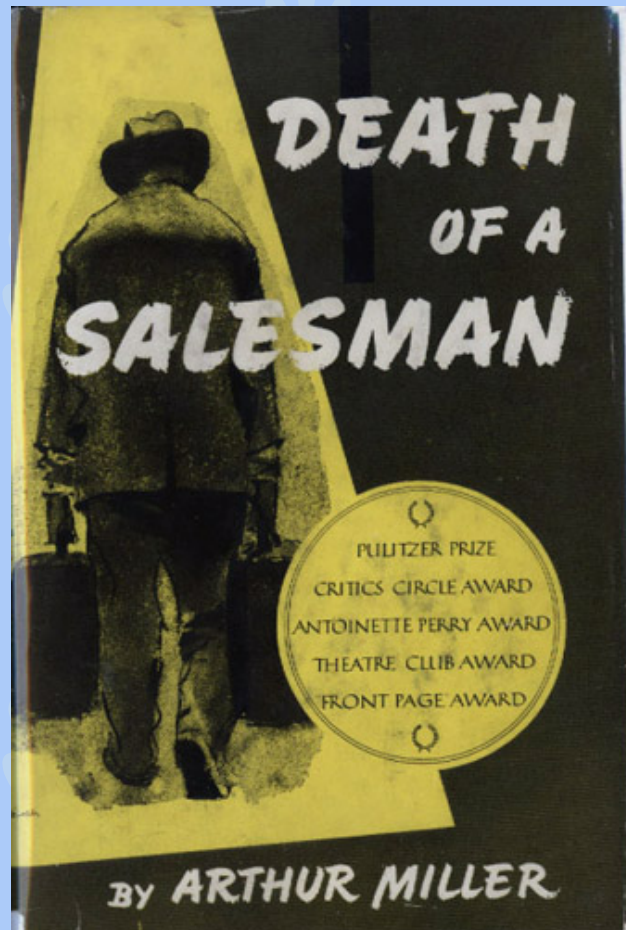
- Following World War II, many important writers reexamined both what literature is meant to accomplish and how to accomplish it.
- Conflicts between conformity and individuality, tradition and innovation, stability and disruption characterized the literature of the period as they also shaped the historical and cultural milieu.
- The ideal of homogeneity led many writers to assume that a single work—short story, novel, poem, or play—could represent the experiences of an entire people

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- That a common national essence lay beneath distinctions of gender, race, ethnicity, religion, or region.
 - The literary world between 1945 and the Sixties often let readers believe that there could be such a thing as representative American short story, nuanced for upper middle-class patrons in pages of the *New Yorker* magazine while slanted to more homely interests in *Collier's* and *Saturday Evening Post*.
 - Novels of the immediate postwar period followed this trend in greater depth, in larger scale, and with more self-conscious justification.

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- A new generation of novelists desired to write what was called “the great American novel”--a major work that would characterize the larger aspects of national experience.
 - Ambitions were not simply to write a war novel, for example, but *the* war novel; not just a work about corporate big business, but something that encapsulated the subject for all times.



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- Postwar playwrights embraced otherwise mundane characters as universal types. *The Death of a Salesman*, for example, would be examined in the same spotlight once reserved for great people, for here indeed was a figure who stood for the postwar human beings.



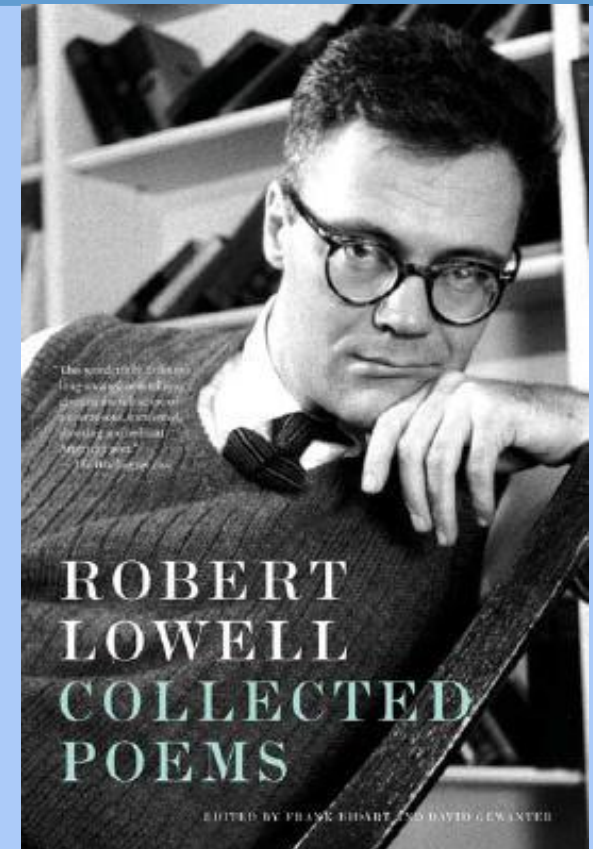
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- In the 1950s the poetic standard was the short lyric meditation, in which the poet, avoiding the first person, would find an object, a landscape, or an observed encounter that epitomized and clarified a feeling.
 - A poem was the product of retrospection, a gesture of composure following the initial shock of stimulus that provided the occasion for writing.
 - In the 1950s and 1960s poets acquired a new visibility in American life. After the war, writers' conferences and workshops, recordings, and published and broadcast interviews became common, and a network of poets traveling to give readings and to become poets-in-residence at universities began to form.

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- Despite this increase in poetry's visibility, its marginal position in the nation's culture, when compared to that of prose fiction, may have allowed for more divergence from the idea of homogeneity.

The Beat Poets

- In poetry, two important and transforming shocks were administered by Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* and Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*.
- Ginsberg made poetry one of the rallying points for underground protest and prophetic denunciation of the prosperous, complacent, gray-spirited Eisenhower years.
- The setting in which the poem appeared is also significant, for *Howl*, like other work associated with what came to be known as the San Francisco Renaissance, challenged the conventions of a literary tradition dominated by the East Coast.

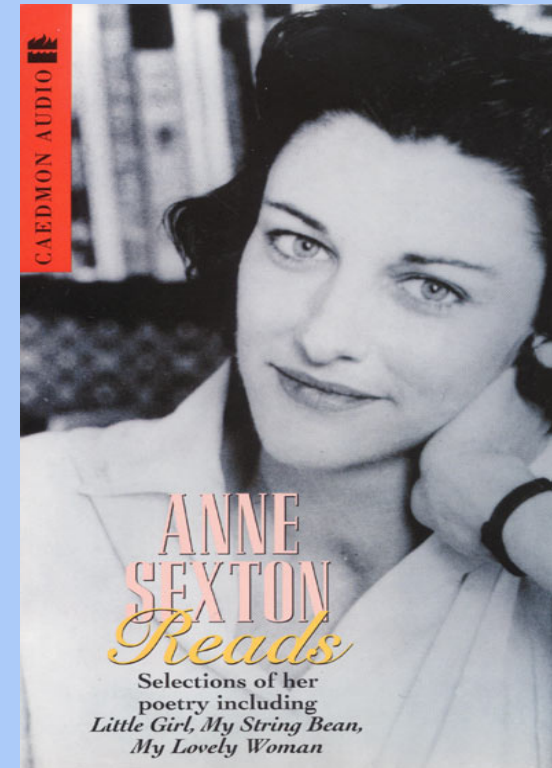
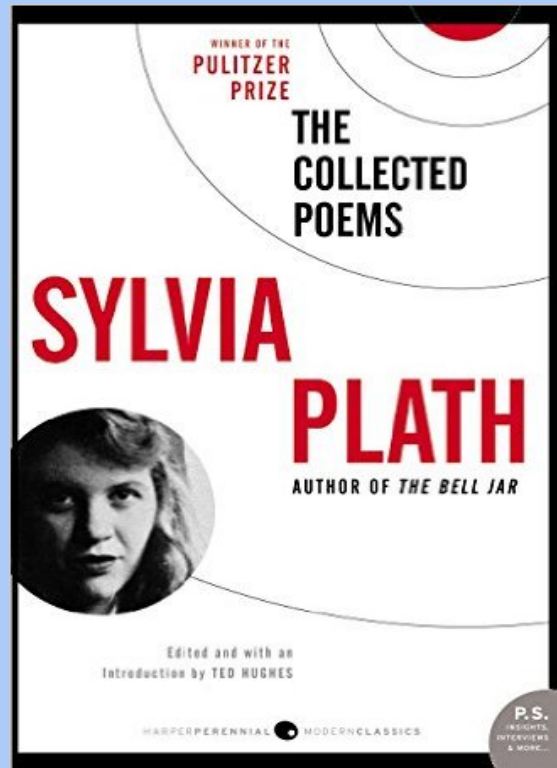
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- With its open, experimental form and strong oral emphasis, Howl sounded a departure from the well-shaped lyric.
 - Lowell, a less popular poet, was rooted in the literary culture of Boston. But with Life Studies he too challenged the literary status quo, bringing new directions and autobiographical intensity into American poetry as he exposed the psychological turbulence suffered by inbred New Englanders.



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- Their poems anticipated and explored the fissures in American social consensus that would erupt into the open conflicts of the 1960s and 1970s and shape American life for decades to come, with growing public unease concerning a broad range of issues: the use of government and industrial power, the institutions of marriage and the family; the rights of racial minorities; women, and homosexuals; the use of drugs; alternative states of consciousness.
 - Taken together, Ginsberg's and Lowell's books also suggested that the invigorating energies of postwar American poetry would arise from diverse regions of the country, their common aim being to restore poetry to a more vital relation with contemporary life.

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- In the 1960s poets began to extend their subject matter to include more explicit and extreme areas of autobiographical revelation—sex, divorce, alcoholism, insanity. The convenient but not very precise label “confessional” came to be attached to certain distinctness of individual experience, not its representativeness.
 - Other poets devised forms that reflected an understanding of poetry as provisional, as representing the changing flow of experience from moment to moment. Some poems began dating each of their poems, as though to suggest that the feelings involved belonged to the moment and were subject to change.

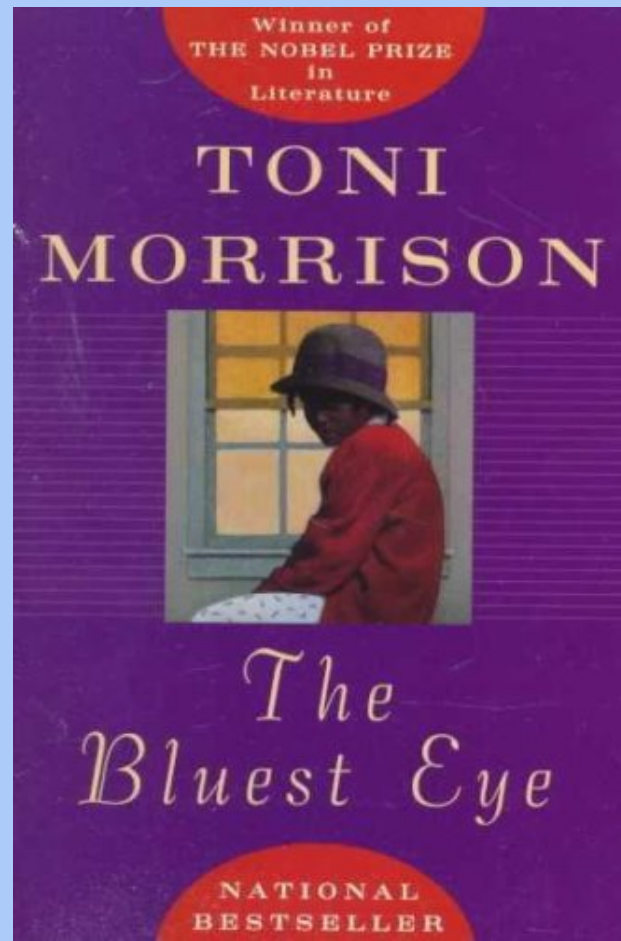
Confessional Poets

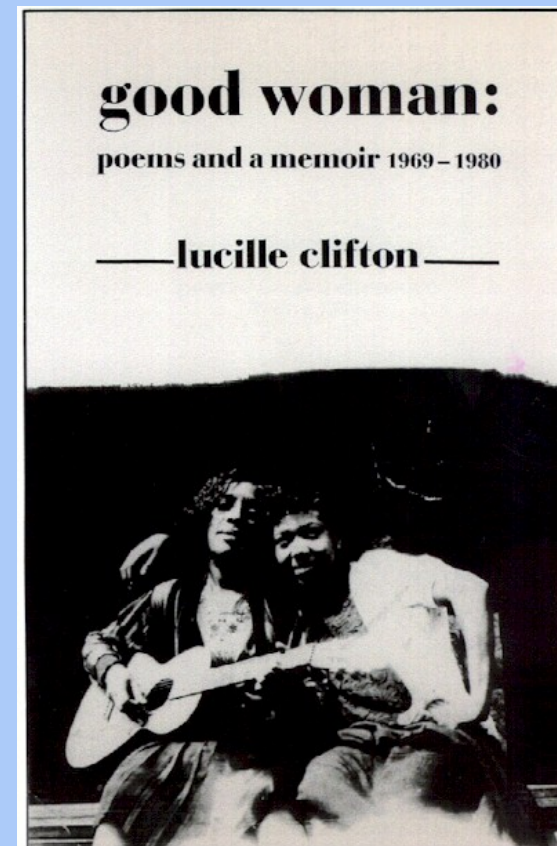
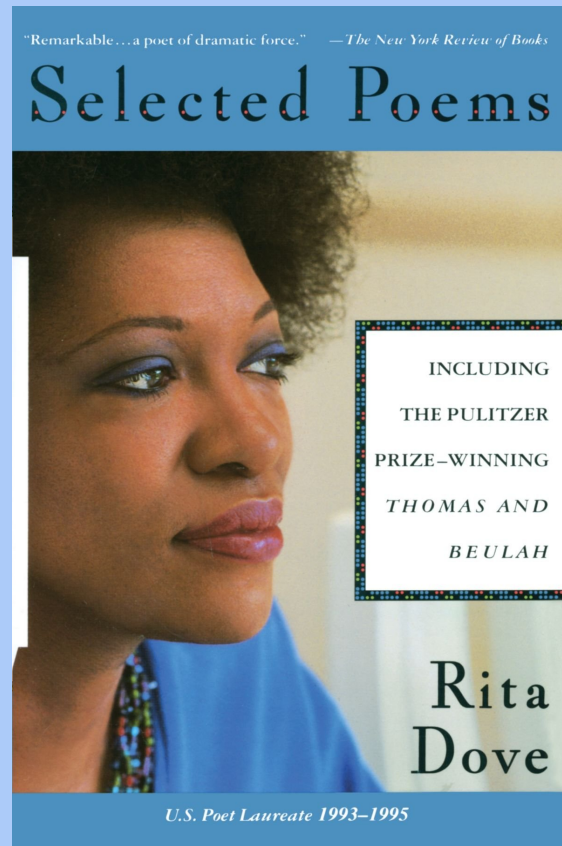


Contemporary Literature

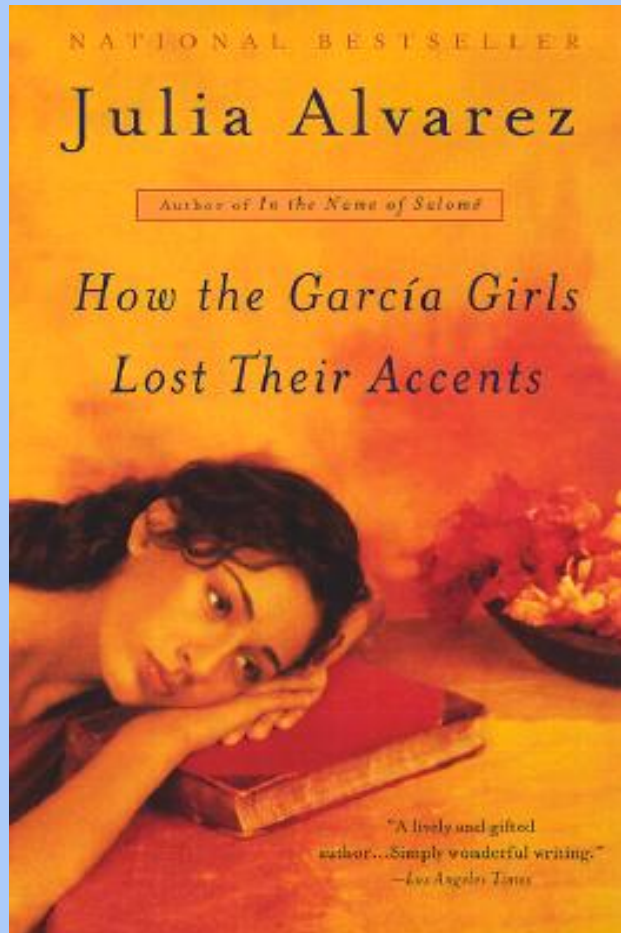
- Literature in the 1960s was often extreme in its methods and disruptive in its effects.
- Yet much like its social and political developments, the decade's literary trends remained influential beyond the Sixties. Writers continued to experiment with diverse practices with which to render a sense of contemporary reality, and they continued their artistic debates over how that reality was constituted and how it could be represented.

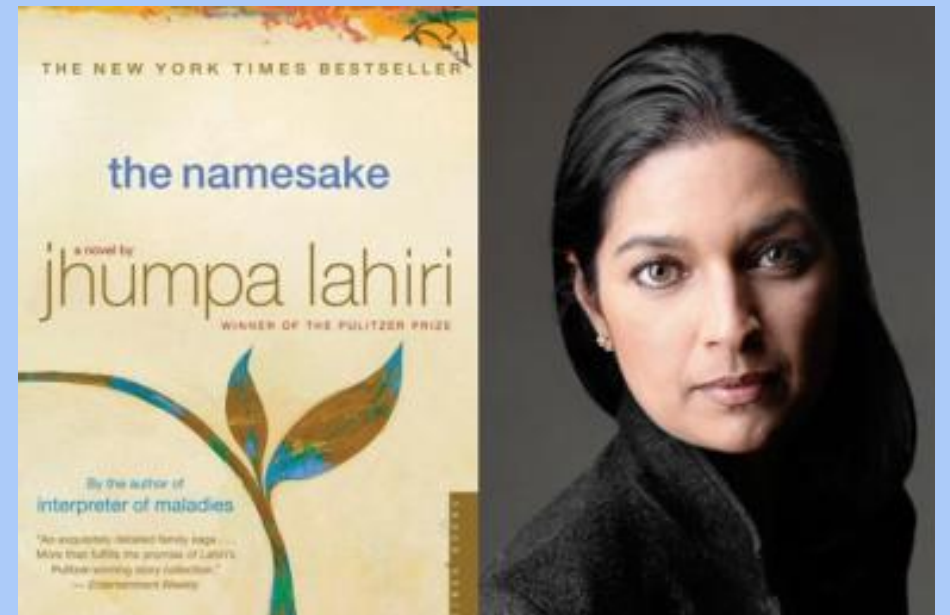
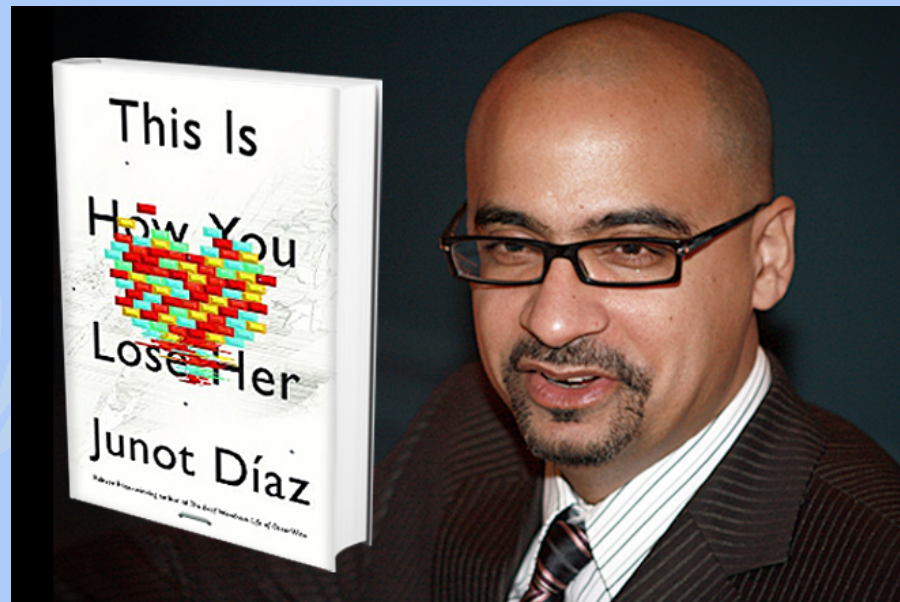
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- One of the dramatic developments, during the 1970s and 1980s, one that indicated the broadening range of achievements among writers of many different backgrounds and persuasions, was the success of African American women—novelists, dramatists, and poets—in finding literary voices and making them heard as important articulations of experience.
 - These writers were able to find a means of expression that helped redefine readers' understanding of the world, whether in imaginative refigurings of the novel like Toni Morrison's, in book length poetic sequences like Rita Dove's *Thomas and Beulah*, or in individual poems that gave voice to African American experience, like those of Lucille Clifton.





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- By the close of the twentieth century other voices emerged that also had been written out of history, and many writers from minority traditions began to take their place at the center of American writing.
 - Another important development involved the increasing prominence of Latina/Latino writing in American literature
 - New York City's Puerto Rican Spanish Harlem not only spread but was augmented by areas of Brooklyn and urban New Jersey being resettled by families from the Dominican Republic—families like those portrayed in the fiction of Julia Alvarez and Junot Diaz, whose lives were enriched by an interpolation of Anglo and Hispanic cultures.





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- Contemporary literature values heterogeneity in its forms and pluralism and its cultural influences. This literature assumes a context wherein the nature of reality changes. Because contemporary culture appears so relentlessly artificial—political events, advertising, and television (including news programs) can all be seen as staged and packaged reforms of fiction—it is also increasingly a literature preoccupied with authenticity and a yearning for the real.

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- Among contemporary literature's emblems is the Internet, and, in a digital age, reality is hybrid, with constant input from multiple sources and a proclivity for combining, editing, altering, and rearranging existing material—processes analogous to DJ sampling in music.
 - In a wide variety of ways writers explore and test the ways language shapes our perceptions of reality, and their work moves in and out of various kinds of language, as if testing the limits and possibilities of the different discourses that make up contemporary life. This energetic investigation of language fuels a new inclusiveness and invigorates imaginative potential.

Work Cited

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