



MODERN AMERICAN DRAMA PLAYWRITING IN THE 1930s

Voices, Documents, New Interpretations

Anne Fletcher

B L O O M S B U R Y

Modern
American Drama:
Playwriting in
the 1930s

DECADES OF MODERN AMERICAN DRAMA:
PLAYWRITING FROM THE 1930s TO 2009

Modern American Drama: Playwriting in the 1930s

by Anne Fletcher

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Series Editors: Brenda Murphy and
Julia Listengarten

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GENERAL PREFACE

Decades of Modern American Drama: Playwriting from the 1930s to 2009 is a series of eight volumes about American theatre and drama, each focusing on a particular decade during the period between 1930 and 2010. It begins with the 1930s, the decade when Eugene O'Neill was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature and American theatre came of age. This is followed by the decade of the country's most acclaimed theatre, when O'Neill, Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller were writing their most distinguished work and a theatrical idiom known as 'the American style' was seen in theatres throughout the world. Its place in the world repertoire established, American playwriting has taken many turns since 1950.

The aim of this series of volumes is to focus attention on individual playwrights or collaborative teams who together reflect the variety and range of American drama during the 80-year period it covers. In each volume, contributing experts offer detailed critical essays on four playwrights or collaborators and the significant work they produced during the decade. The essays on playwrights are presented in a rich interpretive context, which provides a contemporary perspective on both the theatre and American life and culture during the decade. The careers of the playwrights before and after the decade are summarized as well, and a section of documents, including interviews, manuscripts, reviews, brief essays and other items, sheds further light on the playwrights and their plays.

The process of choosing such a limited number of playwrights to represent the American theatre of this period has been a difficult but revealing one. In selecting them, the series editors and volume authors have been guided by several principles: highlighting the most significant playwrights, in terms both historical and aesthetic, who contributed at least two interesting and important plays during

the decade; providing a wide-ranging view of the decade's theatre, including both Broadway and alternative venues; examining many historical trends in playwriting and theatrical production during the decade; and reflecting the theatre's diversity in gender and ethnicity, both across the decade and across the period as a whole. In some decades, the choices are obvious. It is hard to argue with O'Neill, Williams, Miller and Wilder in the 1940s. Other decades required a good deal of thought and discussion. Readers will inevitably regret that favourite playwrights are left out. We can only respond that we regret it too, but we believe that the playwrights who are included reflect a representative sample of the best and most interesting American playwriting during the period.

While each of the books has the same fundamental elements – an overview of life and culture during the decade, an overview of the decade's theatre and drama, the four essays on the playwrights, a section of documents, an Afterword bringing the playwrights' careers up to date, and a Bibliography of works both on the individual playwrights and on the decade in general – there are differences among the books depending on each individual volume author's decisions about how to represent and treat the decade. The various formats chosen by the volume authors for the overview essays, the wide variety of playwrights, from the canonical to the contemporary avant-garde, and the varied perspectives of the contributors' essays make for very different individual volumes. Each of the volumes stands on its own as a history of theatre in the decade and a critical study of the four individual playwrights or collaborative teams included. Taken together, however, the eight volumes offer a broadly representative critical and historical treatment of 80 years of American theatre and drama that is both accessible to a student first encountering the subject and informative and provocative for a seasoned expert.

Brenda Murphy (Board of Trustees Distinguished Professor
Emeritus, University of Connecticut, USA)

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Central Florida, USA)
Series Editors

1

Introduction to the 1930s

Anne Fletcher

Life in the 1930s

The American lived experience belied the homogeneity with which the Great Depression era is generally viewed. While historians and lay people alike find convenience in contrast as an organizing principle – rich versus poor, left versus right, etcetera – the decade of the 1930s reveals itself as both dichotomous and diverse.

Contrasts, coincidences and incongruities abound in the areas of domestic life, education, consumerism, popular entertainment, art, culture, virtually every aspect of daily life. On the one hand, pastimes like the Sunday drive (car ownership was surprisingly widespread then), listening to the radio and going to the movies transcend social class and offer a classless experience, a ‘level playing field’. On the other hand, soup kitchens in major cities and the black rollers (moving topsoil), black rain comprised of water and dust, and dustbowl in the Midwest illustrate how very differently life was experienced across the country. In *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal*, historian William H. Leuchtenberg speaks of ‘the savage irony of want amidst plenty’ that characterized the Depression, with breadlines assembled in agricultural America beneath full silos.¹

The ‘roaring’ twenties concluded² and the decade of the 1930s opened in the wake of the Stock Market Crash in October 1929; at

its close, the United States found itself poised to enter the Second World War. Between autumn 1929 and spring 1933, more than 5,000 banks failed, crippling the American banking system, and some 600,000 homeowners faced foreclosure, half of all home mortgages technically in default.³ With the building industry at a grinding halt, construction at a standstill, workers in lumber and steel, carpenters, plumbers, electricians – all connected with the industry – faced unemployment. National income fell by 50 per cent.⁴ Some 10–15 million people, between one-fifth to one-fourth of the US population, were unemployed by 1933.⁵ The numbers of unemployed workers skyrocketed to almost 50 per cent in industrial centres like Chicago and Detroit.⁶ In rural America, agricultural income fell by 50 per cent, and farm owners abandoned their properties in favour of sharecropping and tenant farming.⁷ Others, like the Joad family in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, piled their worldly possessions into their automobiles and drove west to California in hope of better prospects there.

Despite this dire picture, the unemployed actually remained in the minority, and two-thirds of Midwestern farmers maintained their homesteads. The unemployment crisis consisted more of drastic cutbacks in hours, reductions from full-time to part-time employment, wage reductions and temporary lay-offs, a socio-economic situation repeated to a lesser degree following the 2008 US banking crisis.⁸

Surprisingly, despite horrific living conditions, overall life expectancy in the United States in the 1930s actually rose.⁹ As might be expected, however, the fortunes of black Americans were bleak: death from tuberculosis, a major killer of the decade, and infant mortality rates were twice as great for African-Americans in New York City as for whites.¹⁰ Black workers' wages fell precipitously. Strangely, a racist radio programme, *Amos 'n' Andy*, gained in popularity, providing Louisiana governor, senator and presidential candidate Huey Long with his epithet, the Kingfish.

The lower and middle class were hit hardest – not only minority workers, but the extremes in age, young and old.¹¹ Those between sixteen and twenty-five years old, and those over 60 faced lay-offs and cutbacks first.¹² Widowhood presented economic challenges, as the elderly – especially women – were less employable and often remained reliant on children and other family members for financial support, at least until the social security system was established.

The results – and debate – of social reform like the initiation of social security legislation in 1935, under Franklin Delano Roosevelt, whose presidency dominated the decade, resonate today. Likewise, the political monikers of ‘left’ versus ‘right’ continue to characterize American political contests. Immigration issues and the idea of deporting Mexican-Americans were as much a source of contention then as in the twenty-first century.¹³ At the same time, Communist Party leader Earl Browder’s mid-decade slogan ‘Communism is Twentieth-Century Americanism’ was evoked alternatively by both those who supported social service programmes and those who did not.

Notions of patriotism and citizenship were variously defined: radical writers and artists used their work (and their constitutional rights) to question and critique the world in which they lived, both materially and ideologically. In 1932, a group of leftist writers including Malcolm Cowley, Langston Hughes and Edmund Wilson published a manifesto that supported the Communist presidential candidate William Z. Foster, *Culture in Crisis*. To some degree, the Communist Party offered literati and working class alike a feeling of solidarity, and societies like the John Reed Clubs provided a voice for writers and artists. While the left found itself somewhat invigorated, as Peter Conn points out in *The American 1930s: A Literary History*, ‘to see the thirties exclusively as “the red decade” is to reduce a complex palette to a monotone [*sic*]’.¹⁴

A year-by-year perusal of current events reveals ironies such as congressional approval of the national anthem (March 1931) in the very same month as the erroneous arrest of the ‘Scottsboro Boys’. Just before Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s first election in 1932, destitute First World War veterans seeking their bonuses were gassed and bayoneted in the nation’s capital. Adolf Hitler was installed as Germany’s chancellor (January 1933) within months of FDR’s inauguration as US president (March 1933), and the signing of the Rome–Berlin Axis agreement (October 1936) coincided with FDR’s re-election (November 1936). W. E. B. Du Bois’s groundbreaking study, *Black Reconstruction* (1935), found itself sandwiched between Ruth Benedict’s seminal *Patterns of Culture* (1934) and Arna Bontemps’s *Black Thunder* (1936). Dale Carnegie’s famous self-help guide *How to Win Friends and Influence People* was also published in 1936.

The decade of the 1930s was ironically a time of celebratory fairs and expositions. Chicago boasted the 1933–4 World's Fair, or the Century of Progress, with its 'crystal house' and house of tomorrow. Audiences were wowed by the German airship *Graf Zeppelin's* fly-by. The Chicago Museum of Science and Industry first opened at the Century of Progress Exposition. The California–Pacific International Exposition took place in 1935, the Great Lakes Exposition in Cleveland in 1936, as well as the Texas Centennial Exposition in Dallas in the same year. The 1939 New York World's Fair was not alone as on the West Coast, in San Diego, the Golden Gate International Exposition was mounted in the same year. By far the largest and most impressive, the New York World's Fair symbolically rose like a phoenix (its foundation was Flushing, New York's ash-dump) and exhibited an optimism and 'can do' American spirit. Like all world's fairs, the one at the decade's close pointed to the future – in many ways to the real lived experience of future attendees at the extraordinary 1964 World's Fair, also mounted in New York City. Designer Norman Bel Geddes's 1939 main exhibit, *Futurama*, predicted a nation of vast highways (begun under President Eisenhower later, although never 'automated' as Geddes suggested they might someday be) and suburban sprawl, an American fact of life after the Korean War.

And so, as perhaps with any decade, the 1930s may be viewed as pointing to the future at the same time looking to the past, with both nostalgia and disdain. And, as with any era, the decade of the Great Depression offers valuable lessons for the future.

The Great Depression and the New Deal

The 'New Day' promised by President Herbert Hoover in his 1928 campaign for the presidency was not to be. The Stock Market crashed on 24 October 1929, ending almost a decade of exceptional economic growth, speculation and spending. Many factors contributed to the collapse of the US economy, among them overuse of credit, lack of regulations on Wall Street, a slow-down in industrial production, a decrease in credit for farmers (additionally across the Depression, overproduction of produce) and, perhaps most important, the disproportionate distribution of wealth. The

nation's richest 3 per cent held one-third of the country's purse, a phenomenon that would become, in the 2010s, the 'One Per Cent'.

In his acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention in 1932, Franklin Delano Roosevelt pledged to the American people a 'new deal'. This catchphrase would become symbolic of a host of federal programmes executed under his administration to combat the effects of the Great Depression on the unemployed and working poor. After a campaign in which the future president appeared at times to 'waffle' regarding potential solutions to the nation's socio-economic crisis, by 1933, when he took office, armed with an inner circle of experts from a variety of fields (his 'Brain Trust'), FDR was ready to take action. The '3 R's' – Relief, Recovery and Reform – became his mantra.

During his first 100 days in office, fifteen crucial bills were passed (following a four-day bank 'holiday'), effecting:

- the establishment of the FDIC (the Federal Deposit Insurance Commission that guaranteed individual savings);
- the Federal Securities Act that regulated the Stock Market;
- the first Agricultural Adjustment Act that provided farmers with relief by paying them to produce less; the National Industrial Recovery Act that attempted to stimulate the economy by raising prices was later ruled unconstitutional;
- the Civilian Conservation Corps (discussed below under 'Education');
- the Tennessee Valley Authority that addressed electrical power in the South;
- the Federal Emergency Relief Act that provided direct relief to the unemployed, replaced in 1935 by the Works Progress Administration (renamed the Works Projects Administration in 1939), an umbrella agency under which were housed many programmes that provided employment for literally millions of Americans in a wide range of fields from construction to the arts.

Some historians divide the New Deal era into two phases: the first from 1933 to 1934, and the second and more controversial from 1935 to 1938. In essence this is because, during the first phase, relief was badly needed and any change for the positive was welcomed;

but as time passed, FDR's executive orders and strong control of the government were questioned as overbearing. From FDR's presidency to the present, the United States' two major political parties have continued to represent two ends of an economic spectrum of spending, divided as to the degree to which the government should influence US citizens' daily lives. Regardless of pro- or anti-feelings about it – then or now – the New Deal had a profound effect on life in the 1930s that reverberates in the twenty-first century.

Domestic life

Surprisingly, despite the failed economy, many American families continued to own automobiles in the 1930s, and domestic life in general may be characterized by convenience, streamlining and efficiency. Electric refrigerators and washing machines were widely owned, due in part to manufacturers' reduction to 'Depression' pricing and instalment plans (that, of course, portended the prospect of repossession).

Family life responded to the nation's economic crisis with an increase in separation and divorce rates, shrinkage in the size of the American family, and couples postponing marriage¹⁵ (like Sid and Flo in Clifford Odets's play *Waiting for Lefty*). With the increase in unemployment for males, women entered the workforce, leaving their husbands feeling ashamed. Whether 'stay at home moms' or single women in the marketplace, wives, mothers, single men and women alike struggled to stretch their dollars.

Saving both time and money was crucial in everyday life in the 1930s. Ready-to-wear clothing and even 'pre-fab' garments that required only the stitching of seams and hems became popular. Over the course of the decade, print dresses made of synthetic fabrics whose patterns might mask stains became the craze for women. Sears, Roebuck and Company offered a variety of choices in their 'Hooverette' (named after previous president, Herbert Hoover, whom many blamed the Great Depression) line of inexpensive, reversible, wrap-around dresses.¹⁶

Like ready-to-wear clothing, ready-to-eat or 'fast food' today – obtainable at central locations – became popular during the Depression. The King Kullen Market, possibly the nation's first

supermarket, opened in Jamaica, New York, in 1930, and the Cincinnati-based Big Bear Super Market, the first to use the term 'supermarket' in its advertising, opened in 1933. The Safeway chain began converting its small stores into larger ones, and the Kroger chain emerged in 1933.¹⁷ The most famous of the chain restaurants of the 1930s was Howard Johnson's, which began franchising, but others arose, some of which remain active today, including Toddle House, Krystal, White Castle, A&W Root Beer and Dairy Queen.¹⁸

Commercial desserts and fancy pastries may have been among the first products struck from shopping lists by the cost conscious consumer, but America's sweet tooth was not deterred by the Depression. Because sugar was relatively inexpensive, bread with a little butter and sugar became a treat, as did roasted crackers with a touch of butter.

Among products that made their premiere in the 1930s were the ubiquitous (and less than nutritious) Hostess Twinkie (1931) and numerous candy bars including Snickers, the Heath Bar, Mars, 5th Avenue, Nestlé's Crunch and Hershey's Krackel. Frito corn chips (1932), Nabisco Ritz Crackers (1934) and Lay's potato chips (1939) were all popular as well.¹⁹ 'Junk food', then as now, presented itself as an inexpensive and filling alternative to a nutritionally sound diet. So, even in terms of diet and food, the 1930s offer seemingly odd contrasts.

While many, especially in rural America, canned and otherwise preserved foodstuffs, 'making do', others, in country and city alike, took advantage of new products, like Bisquick (1931), for their baking needs, or consumed processed WonderBread. Hormel's Second World War staple, Spam, actually premiered in 1937, as did Ragu spaghetti sauce and Kraft macaroni and cheese.²⁰ In addition to the preceding convenience foods, advertisements from the 1930s display Campbell's and Van Camp's Pork and Beans, Campbell's and Heinz soups, Royal pudding, Cream of Wheat, 3-Minute Oats, All-Bran Cereal, various manufactured canned fruits and vegetables, the popular Gerber processed baby foods, and other products that promoted reduced 'prep' time. With its less expensive supermarket freezer case and widely distributed *20-Minute Meals* pamphlet cookbooks, Birds Eye popularized frozen foods.²¹ In advertising, a fictitious Betty Crocker (created in 1921) took on a life of her own, blossoming in the 1930s on the radio and acquiring her familiar smiling face in 1936, the same year the Jolly Green Giant made his debut.²²

American dinner table settings consisted of Depression (or 'tank') glass place settings, sold for as little as two dollars for a service for four; Fiesta Ware, at a cost of approximately \$11 for a 24-piece place setting, produced in five colours in 1936; Salem china; or at the close of the decade, Russel Wright.²³ In another strange Depression-era twist, *Brides* magazine was founded in 1934, and preparations for weddings (while there were fewer) included registries and prompted the selection of formal place setting patterns, crystal and cutlery by manufacturers such as Noritake, International Silver, Cambridge or Fostoria.²⁴

In urban centres, some people were literally starving, rummaging in trashcans for rations or making the legendary lunch counter tomato soup from hot water and ketchup. An the other extreme, those who began the decade as wealthy seemed to glide through the Depression with little to no changes in lifestyle. In fact, the upper class elite flaunted their wealth, as exhibited by extraordinary debutante balls such as Barbara Hutton's (grand-daughter of the Woolworth store founder) 'coming out' party, at a reported cost of \$60,000, in 1933. The upper crust and movie stars frequented elegant establishments like the Stork Club and the El Morocco, the stuff of movies for the less well-to-do. The Waldorf-Astoria Hotel opened in 1931, at a reputed cost of \$43 million.²⁵ With this flagrant display, it appeared that the wealthiest of Americans (as in the twenty-first century with talk of the One Per Cent) might actually have resented federally-funded social service programmes intended to offer a 'leg up' to the poor and disenfranchised. Perhaps, despite the headlines, they were simply unaware.

Education

In their 1930s volume of the *American Popular Culture through History* series, William A. and Nancy K. Young assert that the Depression 'changed perceptions about being young in the United States'.²⁶ Prior to the 1930s, because they often entered the workforce so early, young people in their teenage years were viewed more as adults. The paucity of jobs in the decade forced young people out of the workforce, causing them to remain in school longer and precipitating the creation of more organized

activities for this age group. 'Teenager', a term formerly restricted to wealthy high school students, began to be used in reference to young people of all classes during the Depression.²⁷ And, teenagers became the target market for products and social activities.

In major cities, dues-paying (generally 30 cents per week) youth gathered for hours on end in 'cellar clubs' adapted from previously existing buildings. The clubs were often outfitted with radios, ping-pong tables and pianos, and young people found a safe haven where they could amuse themselves and visit with each other. One Brooklyn block allegedly sported forty such establishments. Naturally, aggregates of youth in one place pointed to 'gangs', but an equal number of cellar clubs accomplished their intention of providing a place for young people to congregate during hard times.²⁸ Sometimes young men (cellar clubs were predominantly peopled by men) assisted in outfitting the establishments with dance floors, rest rooms for the girls who attended, or other niceties. Some clubs distinguished themselves as photography laboratories or automotive workshops.²⁹

Government assistance programmes were created for at-risk youth, a tradition that has continued into the twenty-first century. Established in 1933, a New Deal programme, the Civilian Conservation Corps (originally titled the Civil Corps Reforestation Youth Rehabilitation Movement), focused on unmarried, unemployed male youth aged seventeen to twenty-seven. At its height, the CCC boasted 3 million young men, offering room and board and a monthly salary of \$30 in exchange for manual labour³⁰ related to the nation's forests, irrigation and other outdoor public works projects. Nicknamed the 'tree army', the CCC built more than 800 parks and planted more than 3 billion trees.³¹ Beautifully crafted structures, like the still-operational Giant City Lodge in the Shawnee National Forest, Makanda, Illinois, pay tribute to the CCC's success even today.

In 1935, another agency, the National Youth Administration, was established under the auspices of the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Slightly different from the CCC, this organization was created to offer useful work for young people on relief. The NYA offered two specific programmes: the student work programme for youths in school (lower grades, high school, college and even graduate school), and out-of-school employment for unemployed youth aged sixteen to twenty-four.³²

These programmes served as the progenitors for many others, some of which remain in existence today. Additionally, non-government sponsored activities for youth, such as the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts of America, flourished during the Depression.

Sports and recreation

The United States was a nation in search of heroes in the 1930s, and the sports arena did not disappoint.

At the start of the decade, the All-American sport, baseball, was already in its heyday, with the legendary Babe Ruth's salary rising to \$80,000 (more than the president's).³³ Lou Gehrig was popular, and Joe DiMaggio was a baseball hero by mid-decade. Attending a live game was affordable, games were broadcast on the radio, statistics were readily available in newspapers, and collecting baseball cards was a hobby for youth. Lights were added to the fields in 1935, increasing after-work attendance.³⁴ It is hard to imagine life without the NBA (National Basketball Association) or Monday Night Football, but these team sports were in their infancy then.

Surprisingly, although there was some talk of doing so, the Olympics were not suspended during the 1930s (they were, subsequently, across the years of the Second World War). Held in Lake Placid, New York, the 1932 Olympics were the first winter Olympics held in the United States; the summer Olympics that year were hosted by Los Angeles. In both events, the United States earned more medals than any other country, in some measure proving the American attitude of 'stick-to-it-a-tive-ness'.

The 1936 Olympics proved contentious as they were hosted in Berlin, with Hitler in power and many predicting war. Hitler attempted to ban Jewish athletes from competing but recanted in the face of a boycott by the majority of participating countries. Nevertheless, the games were wielded as a Nazi tool and the country 'promoted an image of a new, strong, and united Germany'.³⁵ Black American athlete Jesse Owens emerged as an even bigger track and field star at these Olympics than he was at home, breaking three records and winning four gold medals. Germany out-medalled all the other countries, with the United States ending second.

The tale of race horse Seabiscuit – an equine Horatio Alger story

– befits the spirit of the 1930s. The horse appeared lazy and recalcitrant, an unlikely candidate for the Race Horse of the Year Award he earned in 1938. Once paired with Canadian jockey Red Pollard, who understood the horse's personality, Seabiscuit exhibited the speed for which he would become known. When Pollard was injured riding another thoroughbred, jockey George Woolf took the saddle for Seabiscuit's triumph over legendary War Admiral at Pimlico in November 1938. The horse suffered an injury in a subsequent race, so he and Pollard recovered together, reunited for the 'Match of the Century' with War Admiral, in which Seabiscuit trounced the other champion. Seabiscuit's story has been depicted three times in films, one starring Depression screen sweetheart Shirley Temple.³⁶

Difficult economic times demanded inexpensive forms of sports and recreation. The radio proved a gathering place for the family; for example, boxing matches aired on the radio on Friday evenings (and heavyweight boxer Joe Louis's twelve-year reign as champion began in 1937). Families literally made music together, gathering around pianos for sing-alongs. The American flyer wagon (Radio Flyer) debuted in 1930.³⁷

Ping-pong, Pick-Up Sticks, Marbles, Jacks, Monopoly, Sorry!, Scrabble, Contract bridge³⁸ and jigsaw puzzles (reaching a sales peak of 10 million per week in 1933)³⁹ were all popular. Of course, Mickey Mouse was all the rage, and for those who could afford one, there was the ever-popular wristwatch with his image. The 1930s continued the 'athon' craze, with talking marathons, piano playing marathons, kissathons, rockathons (in rocking chairs) and dance-athons. June Havoc (née Hovick) of *Gypsy* fame (as Gypsy Rose Lee's sister) holds the dance marathon record of 3,600 hours, established in 1934.⁴⁰

Unfortunately, as in any time of stress, gambling on sports events took its toll on some. At the other extreme, those of wealth continued with tennis, golf, horseriding and their other more expensive sports and recreational activities.

Science and technology

Advances in American science and technology continued in spite of the Depression, and this area, too, offers diversity and debate

– debate over a future ‘in which humanity would either be free of routine labour or become a slave of machinery’.⁴¹ In his 1938 *The Culture of Cities* (revised and reissued in 1961 as the National Book Award-winning *The City in History*), public intellectual Lewis Mumford advocated a balance between the mechanized and the ecological worlds. Sadly, his prescient thoughts on urban and cultural renewal would be silenced by the Second World War.

The trope of speed, streamlining and efficiency characterized scientific progress and industrial development in the 1930s every bit as much as it revealed itself in other aspects of daily life and of the arts. The decade saw inventions as varied as the parking meter,⁴² the zippo lighter,⁴³ Alka-Seltzer,⁴⁴ the beer can⁴⁵ and the photocopier.⁴⁶

Seminal advances were made in the field of medicine, many of which remain useful in treatments today. The pathologies of both Cushing⁴⁷ and Crohn⁴⁸ syndromes (each named for the physician who identified the conditions) were determined in 1931. The first yellow fever vaccine was developed in 1932 at the Rockefeller Foundation’s Yellow Fever Laboratories, the dangerous undertaking executed by Wilbur A. Sawyer, Wray Lloyd and S. F. Kitchen.⁴⁹ Sodium thiopental (aka pentothal, or ‘truth serum’), the first intravenous anaesthetic, was created at the Abbott Laboratories in 1934.⁵⁰ The 1934 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine was conferred jointly on George R. Minot, William P. Murphy and George H. Whipple for their discovery of liver therapy to combat anaemia. Defibrillation was used successfully on a dog (1933).⁵¹ In 1939, John H. Lawrence treated a cancer patient with beams of energized neutrons from a particle accelerator.⁵² Chemist C. C. King first isolated Vitamin C,⁵³ and Vitamin E was first isolated in a pure form by Gladys Anderson Emerson, with Herbert M. Evans, director of the University of California, Berkeley’s Institute of Experimental Biology.⁵⁴

On a bleaker note, a shameful American medical study, the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment, was initiated in 1932 and continued in various phases for 40 years. The premise of the study – to ascertain the effects of untreated syphilis on black men in the rural South – was noteworthy, and participants were compensated with free medical treatment, meals, transportation and burial insurance. The insidious aspect of the study is that after penicillin was found to combat the disease in the 1940s, participants were not informed, and their disease was allowed to go untreated.⁵⁵

In physics, Ernest Lawrence invented the cyclotron,⁵⁶ popularly known as the *atom smasher*, and Carl David Anderson discovered the positron, or positively charged electron, in 1932, for which he won the Nobel Prize in Physics. The related field of astronomy burgeoned, with the discovery of the planet Pluto (stripped later of planet status) in 1930; the nation's first planetarium, the Adler, in Chicago, opened the same year. In 1933, a shortwave radio hiss was determined to emanate from the Milky Way, marking the beginning of radio astronomy;⁵⁷ and 1935 saw the openings of both the Hayden Planetarium in New York City and the Griffith Observatory in Los Angeles. In 1939, the man who would later be famous as the 'Father of the Atom Bomb', J. Robert Oppenheimer (with George Volkoff), calculated the structure of neutron stars⁵⁸ and (with Hartland Snyder) ascertained the existence of what would come to be called 'black holes'.⁵⁹

Pre-dating by three decades the quintessential line about plastics in the film *The Graduate*, the man-made substance was 'tagged as the savior of the new age'.⁶⁰ Although it was known that plastic could never be reduced to its former components, biodegradability would not become a national concern for many years. Fibreglass was invented in 1932–3, as material for thermal building insulation.⁶¹ Early in 1935, while working at the DuPont Experimental Station, American chemist Gérard Berchet (under the direction of Wallace Carothers) developed the synthetic polymer nylon,⁶² which was finally introduced to the public at large at the 1939 World's Fair. In a happy accident (1938), also at DuPont, polytetrafluoroethylene, or Teflon, was discovered.⁶³

Labour and the working class

In some ways, the overall prosperity of the 1920s contributed to a downward turn in the American labour movement; prices of goods were fairly stable, and, except for coal mining and farming, most industries flourished – temporarily. Union membership declined, and, as a result, the American Federation of Labor's strength weakened. Management associated unionism with communism, opposed to the all-American spirit of individualism, and applied 'Red Scare' tactics, coercing workers into signing 'yellow-dog'

contracts whereby they pledged not to join a union. The National Association of Manufacturers adhered to the 'American Plan', refusing to negotiate with unions. The court system proved less supportive of workers across the 1920s, and corporations sought more injunctions against potential strikes than ever before. Although organized labour made some gains earlier in terms of working conditions, in the late 1920s, 'speed-ups' or 'stretch outs' forced workers, especially in the textile and mining industries, to work longer hours for less pay, often under unsafe conditions. Strike after strike broke out across all areas of industry, from longshoremen, to coal miners, to textile workers and those in the automotive industry, and continued throughout the 1930s. In the middle of the decade a faction of workers broke away from the American Federation of Labour (AFL), forming the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO); the two organizations later amalgamated to become the AFL-CIO.⁶⁴ The Depression simply 'sealed the deal' for American labour, pitching millions of workers into unemployment and abject poverty. The second flurry of New Deal programming, with the National Labor Relations Act (the Wagner Act, 1935), assured labourers the right to unionize and to strike if necessary. The Fair Labor Standards Act (1938) set maximum and minimum wages for most workers.

Arts and culture

Perhaps nowhere is the diversity of the 1930s more apparent than in the arts. Again, the temptation to view arts and culture through a bifurcated lens is great because of the tendency among practitioners to gravitate to political extremes, to participate in political and social advocacy, or, on the other hand, to seemingly avoid pressing issues of the day. In actuality, writers and artists of the decade, whether overtly political or not, as in any era, responded to and reflected the tenor of their time, across a wide stylistic spectrum. Unique perhaps to the Depression era are the degrees to which the arts and culture were used as tools for social change both within the Works Progress Administration and in the private sector.

Arts projects produced across the nation as part of the WPA provided employment for unemployed artists and espoused the

'rhetoric of the people'.⁶⁵ Although the National Endowment for the Arts was founded in 1965 (in the age of President Lyndon Johnson's 'Great Society'), it pales in comparison to the federal arts programmes of the Depression. Historian David Eldridge recounts New Deal data regarding the arts:

168 symphony orchestras, thirty-five choral groups and thirty chamber ensembles formed by the Federal Music Project. Thirty million people attended shows put on by the Federal Theatre Companies in forty cities in twenty-two states, The Federal Writers Project produced 1,200 publications ... Five thousand artists were employed by the Federal Art Project to produce 108,000 easel paintings, 17,700 sculptures and 11,200 print designs ... 400 murals and 6,800 easel works were created in five months by the Public Works of Art project, and another 1,200 murals commissioned by the US Treasury's Section of Painting and Sculpture. There were also 77,000 photographs taken for the historical section of the farm Security Administration.⁶⁶

The WPA literally brought art into the streets and created a more democratized notion of it. Arts accessibility is evidenced by the Federal Theatre Project's (see *American Culture in the 1930s*, 2008) remarkable 30 million overall attendance.⁶⁷

Stylistically, literature and all of the arts (including architecture and film) exhibit *Modernism* on the move. Emanating from late nineteenth century thought and persisting well into the twentieth century, Modernism is characterized by its embrace of the subconscious, multiple perspectives and fragmentation, expressed in literature via stream-of-consciousness writing and/or polyvocality. Modernist tactics abound in this period, but often, regardless of the artist's socio-economic standing, they are projected from a proletarian perspective, with a political slant. Hints of and even direct influences on styles of the 1960s are displayed in the 1930s, and perhaps the only profound delineation between Modernism of the 1930s and *Postmodernism* much later is the centring of Depression-era art in the present, while often self-referential. Postmodern art, on the other hand, overtly signals or critiques the past.

Literature

Prose, drama and poetry in the 1930s offer a cornucopia of form and style. Some authors, like John Dos Passos and Langston Hughes, for example, produced work across genres. Dalton Trumbo, John Howard Lawson and others of the later infamous Hollywood Ten wrote fiction and drama in the 1930s, turning to work as scriptwriters later.

In the non-fiction arena, works like Frederick Lewis Allen's *Only Yesterday: An Informal Study of the 1920s* (1931) and Malcolm Cowley's *Exile's Return* (1934) chronicle the transition from the 1920s into the 1930s. Constance Rourke's *American Humor: A Study of the National Character* (1931) offered an early formal study of American folk culture – before popular entertainment was an area of inquiry – and, in the same year, James Truslow Adams's history, *The Epic of America*, in which he references 'the American Dream' – a dream already unattainable by most US citizens – was published.

The American Guide Series, a New Deal project, sought to create a written record of the past and present of each state and several individual cities in the United States. Completed in over fifty volumes, the series totals over 31,000 pages. The guidebooks' authors, however, came from varying degrees of experience, and the works exhibit different tones, some of the Southern volumes exhibiting benevolence toward slavery, for example.⁶⁸

Documentary pieces, although not particularly popular among the general reading public, emerged as writers took to the road in some number, practising immersion among the working-class impoverished, drawing on their observations to pen ethnographic studies, often published in journals, like Edmund Wilson's articles in *New Republic*. In 1936, James Agee and Wallace Evans, commissioned by *Fortune* magazine, conducted such a study, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), a work decades later recognized as a classic of the documentary form. At the same time as Agee and Evans's travels, *Fortune* dispatched reporters to Rochester, New York, where they found the city's dwellers experiencing a more comfortable existence, thus exhibiting the heterogeneity of life in the decade.⁶⁹ Similarly, Charles Morrow Wilson's travelogue *Roots of America* paints a pastoral picture of rugged, rural life in the 1930s. Journalist Lorena Hickok, famous as First Lady

Eleanor Roosevelt's closest female friend (and perhaps lover), travelled across the country, chronicling Depression conditions and reporting back to Washington on her findings.

Literary documentaries include Theodore Dreiser's *Tragic America* (1931), Edmund Wilson's *American Jitters* (1932) and Sherwood Anderson's *Puzzled America* (1935), and, in the realm of fact-based fiction, Erskine Caldwell's Georgia sharecropper story, *Tobacco Road* (1932), Grace Lumpkin's tale of textile workers, *To Make My Bread* (1932), and John Steinbeck's exploration of Mexican California in *Tortilla Flat* (1933), an apple pickers' strike in *In Dubious Battle* (1936) and, of course, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939).

'Quasi-autobiographies', reflecting their authors' socio-political slants, include Mike Gold's *Jews Without Money* (1930), Edward Dahlberg's *The Bottom Dogs* (1930) and Jack Conroy's *The Disinherited* (1933). Gold advocated a form and style he deemed 'proletarian realism'. The epithet 'social realism' would be coined only in retrospect.

Others approached the lived experience of Americans deeply affected by the economics of the day – like Nathanael West's 'tetralogy of disillusionment'⁷⁰ (*The Dream Life of Balso Snell*, 1931; *Miss Lonelyhearts*, 1933; *A Cool Million*, 1934; and *The Day of the Locust*, 1939). West turned American myth on its end, presenting the dream of success as an empty shell. John Dos Passos also subverted and attacked the American democratic myth, commenting on what he saw as a tragic disparity between the American dream and the reality of the times.

Costume novels, particularly those focused on wars, comprised a large segment of the fiction market. Some, like *Guns Along the Mohawk* by George D. Edmonds, took the Revolutionary War for inspiration. Others looked to the French and Indian War, as in Kenneth Roberts's *Northwest Passage*, the 1940 film version of which starred Spencer Tracy. Margaret Mitchell's ever-popular but arguably racist 1936 *Gone With the Wind* turned, of course, to the Civil War. For subject matter, authors also returned to legendary figures like Pocahontas or Abraham Lincoln (a constant across the decades of the twentieth century).

'Women's novels' (some categorize *Gone With the Wind* among them) gained in popularity – *Back Street* by Fannie Hurst (first adapted as a film in 1932, and subsequently in 1941 and 1961)

and Rachel Field's *All This and Heaven Too* (filmed in 1940) are examples of this subgenre.

Eldridge claims that half the bestselling novels of the decade were detective novels by Erle Stanley Gardner, John Dickson Carr, Rex Stout, Ellory Queen and others, with the 'hard-boiled' style of Dashiell Hammett⁷¹ (*Maltese Falcon*, 1930) and his Sam Spade character continuing to intrigue readers across the decades. Like *The Maltese Falcon*, Hammett's *The Thin Man* (1934, originally published in *Redbook*) was adapted for film, and in the 1950s, for television, a medium that popularized Gardner's Perry Mason as well.

The Nancy Drew detective series, targeting adolescent girls, debuted in 1930, and the juvenile reading series the Hardy Boys continued to grow in popularity since its inception in 1927. Laura Ingalls Wilder's decade-long romance with her Midwestern upbringing expressed in novels for young people began in 1932, with the famous (much later serialized for television) *The Little House on the Prairie* reaching the general public in 1935.

Perhaps because of its low cost, pleasure reading, a solo activity, became more popular across the Depression. Book-of-the-Month Club sales grew, and in 1939, late in the decade, Pocket Books, reprints of bestsellers and classics, became available for 25 cents a copy.⁷²

The 1930s was, indeed, one of the great eras of the American novel, as represented by the works of John Steinbeck, William Faulkner, Zora Neal Hurston, Pearl S. Buck and others. Buck's Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Good Earth* (1931) constituted the first of her trilogy (followed by *Sons*, 1932, and *A House Divided*, 1935) dealing with life in a Chinese village.

By the mid-1930s, especially after a 1935 riot, the Harlem Renaissance (the blossoming of 'Negro' art in New York in the 1920s) was over. Many of the black literati, like James Weldon Johnson and W. E. B. Du Bois, left Harlem, often taking teaching positions at colleges.⁷³ Despite this diaspora, dialogue continued among black intellectuals about systemic racism and assimilation. The decade opens with some works that continue to perpetuate negative racial stereotypes, but by mid-decade in *Mules and Men* (1935), anthropologist/writer Zora Neal Hurston details black 'folklore' to scrutinize representations of race and gender in black life, and, in her best-known work, *Their Eyes Were Watching*

God (1937), she clearly challenges racial uplift ideology by representing southern blacks without filter, rather than, as was common, presenting their behaviour as imitative of white culture.⁷⁴ Like many in the Depression, black writer Richard Wright sought solutions to racism and economic depravity in Marxism, and the decade turns with his *Native Son* (1940) and a character who finds identity only through violence.

As this brief overview of prose of the 1930s indicates, 'authors were pulled in various directions at once: political radicalism vs escapism; literary modernism and theatricalism vs realism; region vs nature; man vs nature; and nostalgia vs hope for the future'.⁷⁵

Poetry

Poetry's contribution in terms of literary criticism in the 1930s may be seen as the roots of New Criticism, with its emphasis on 'close reading' of the text itself (apart from the author's biography), explored in the seminal *Understanding Poetry* (1938) by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren.

Like many of the novelists, the careers of several poets represented in the 1930s, including T. S. Elliot and, perhaps the United States' most famous poet, Robert Frost, span decades of American literature. As with virtually all aspects of life in the Great Depression, variety and diversity were *de rigueur* in the realm of poetry. Many poets directly attended to the historical moment in their verse, some more overt than others in their politicization. Wallace Stevens, Stephen Vincent Benét, Hart Crane, e. e. cummings, Marianne Moore, Muriel Rukeyser, Archibald MacLeish and Langston Hughes are among the most notable, with MacLeish and Hughes crossing into the realm of dramatic literature as well.

Known for his communist sympathies and socialist practices, Langston Hughes's poetry, in particular, resounds with radicalism and even revolution. Additionally, like Zora Neale Hurston's novels, his poetry takes to task assimilation and was criticized for its representation of black life. Among his poems of protest is 'Advertisement for the Waldorf Astoria', first published in the communist organ *New Masses* in December 1931, which mocks the lavish hotel's marketing of its opening. *Scottsboro Limited*: