

Post-War Paradoxes

LIFE AND LITERATURE
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The fifties were a decade of paradox: on the one hand there was full employment and a massive rise in living standards, on the other hand it was a decade of fear; fear of the bomb and fear of Communism.

The United States manifested itself as a world power and interfered several times during the period, especially in the Far East. Space was "conquered" with the first satellite in 1958, but not till after the Americans had had the shock that it was the Russians who had been first in space with the Sputnik the year before. The Cold War was replaced by an atmosphere of negotiation and the fifties saw the first East/West summit meeting in Geneva in 1955.

In literature the predominant themes were the search for the self and harsh criticism of the false, materialistic, post-war society.

Post-War Problems

The immediate post-war period was one of great decisions for the United States as well as for Europe.

At Home

9 million demobilized soldiers had to be eased back into civilian life. Under President Tru-

man's (1945-53) "Fair Deal" reforms social security was extended, minimum wages were raised, and from 1948 there was a federal program of slum clearance and low-rent housing.

Abroad

Representatives of 50 nations met in April 1945 to establish the framework for the United Nations (UN). The work for a forum for peaceful discussions and negotiations about international differences, started before the First World War was ended. In 1947 President Truman said in Congress, "It must be the policy of the United States to support the free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures," a statement that came to be known as the Truman-doctrine. "Outside pressures" in Europe in the late forties were the bad economic and industrial conditions. In 1948 Congress agreed on the so-called Marshall-plan (named after the Secretary of State) which offered American money, goods and machinery to any European nation that wished to participate. During this programme of American support, \$12,000 million in goods and services helped bring economic recovery to 16 countries from Iceland to Turkey.

In 1948 a critical situation developed in Berlin. The three allied zones (the British, the French and that of the United States) wanted to introduce a currency reform to bring the zones closer together and closer to Western Europe. The Soviet reaction was a blockade of all road and rail traffic. The British-American answer was the Berlin airlift lasting almost a year, transporting food, fuel and medicine to the people of West Berlin.

The Berlin crisis following the expansion of Soviet influence in Eastern Europe aroused

growing alarm throughout Western Europe. A consequence was the establishing of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1949 to coordinate the military defences of the 12 member nations against possible Soviet aggression.

Prosperity

The American economy adjusted from war to peace without serious unemployment. There was increased demand for consumer goods, and higher wages combined with a growing population to stimulate industrial expansion.

The years when President Eisenhower was in office (1953-61) saw a development from the small-town attitude and atmosphere to suburban life. White people moved out of the inner cities, part of which disappeared in slum clearance projects, and part of which were taken over by the thousands of black people who migrated from segregation and harsh discrimination in the South to the more open and tolerant society of the North with its industrial workplaces. Between 1946 and 1955 15 million new dwellings were built, mostly single-family houses, in the suburbs. Components for these houses began to be mass produced, and a house could actually be "built" by a group of unskilled workers within a week. From 1950-60 America's suburban population rose 40 times more than the population in the inner cities.

If you lived in the suburbs you needed a car for going to work – and for shopping, often in the new supermarkets which replaced the small-town general store and the local corner store. In 1960 nine out of ten suburban families had a car and one out of five had two. And what cars! The American post-war self-confidence and affluence were shown off in the most preposterous equipment and ornamentation. The car was a mobile status

symbol, the bigger and shinier the better, whereas reliability and safety were of less importance. Other consumer durables were TVs, refrigerators, washing machines and the first dish-washers. It was actually the boom in car production which finally led to the recognition and acceptance of a labour movement. When he took over leadership from his grandfather, Henry Ford II actually started cooperation with shop stewards on wages, working hours and safety on the job. This was a so-called "managerial revolution" instead of the "police-and-punishment" course of earlier times – and it proved profitable, not only for the Ford company, but, as it spread, also in other sections of industry. The labour market entered a calm phase and even old hostilities between the two major umbrella organizations the AFL and the CIO (American Federation of Labor, Congress of Industrial Organizations) were buried when the two merged in 1955, totalling as many as 15 million members.

Anxiety

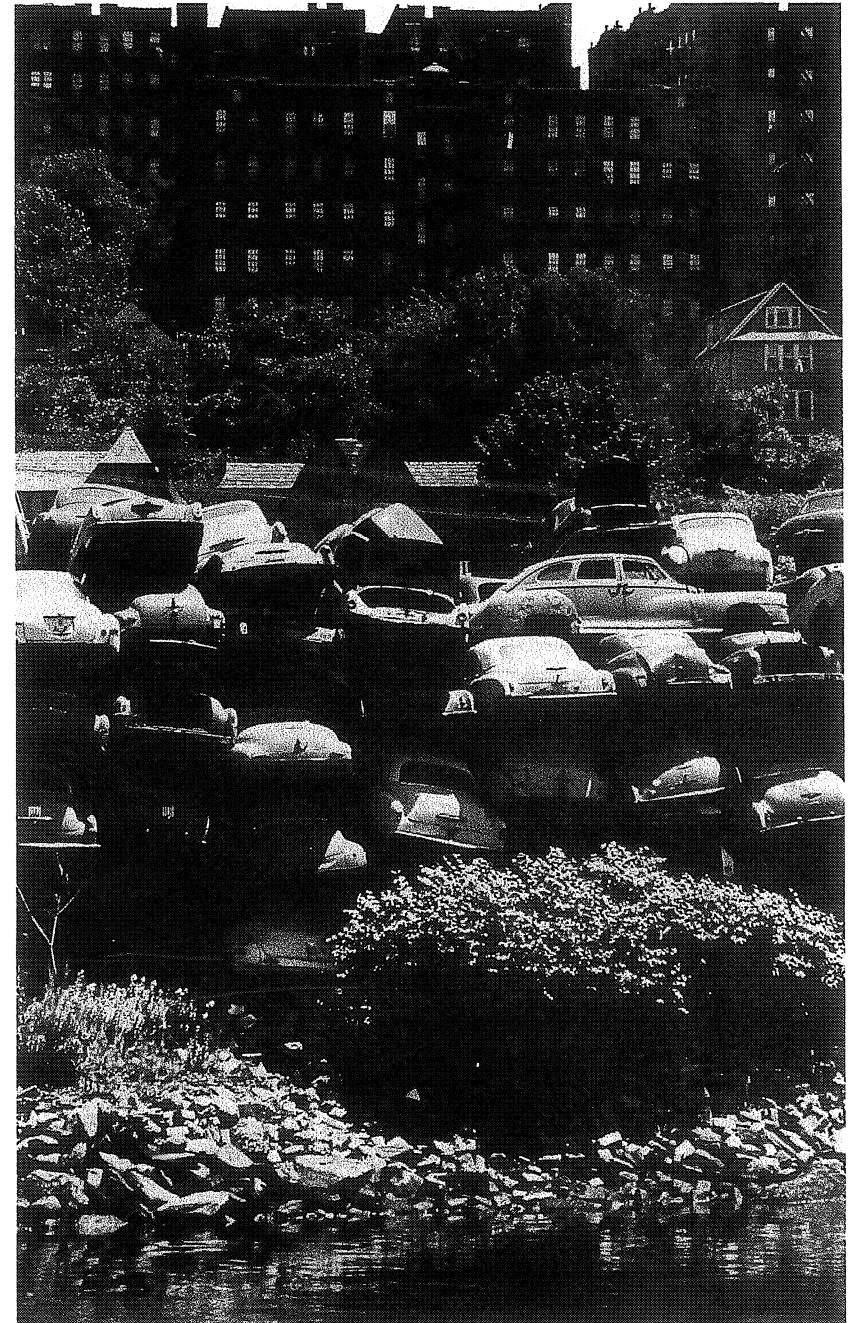
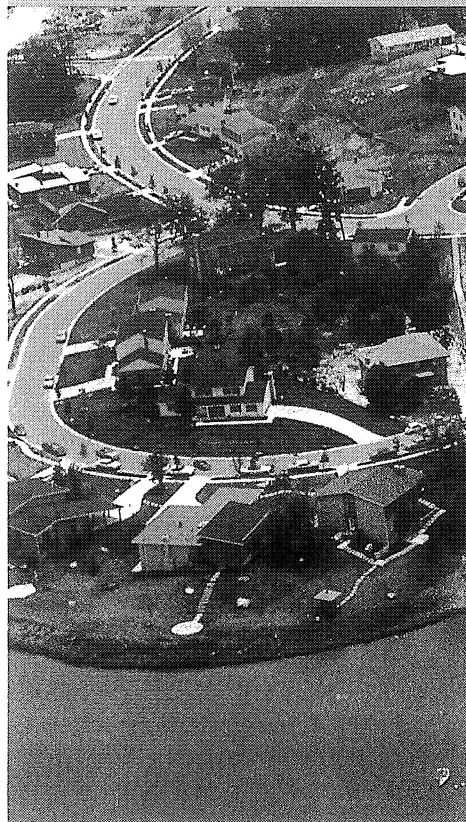
Those were some of the aspects of the so-called Eisenhower-prosperity, but the decade has also been called an Age of Anxiety. The atom bomb had been acceptable as a means of ending the Second World War in the Far East, but many Americans grew anxious as the Cold War was stepped up over Berlin in 1948-49, and as the Soviet Union increased its influence in Eastern Europe – within three years of the end of the war Communist-dominated governments were in control of Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Albania and the Soviet occupied zone of Germany. When the Soviet Union was known to have tested nuclear bombs by September 1949, Americans came to fear, not only the prospect of a "push-button war" be-

The affluence of American suburbia.

tween the East and the West, but also the expansion of Communism as such.

One result of this "Red Scare" was the involvement in the Korean War.

An American suburb in the 1950s.



War in Korea

Events in Asia and the Far East continued to dominate America's international concerns, as a sort of aftermath to the Second World War. As a result of the Second World War agreement the United States and the Soviet Union took "protective" possession of Korea with the 38th parallel dividing the Soviet zone in the North from the American zone in the South. By mid-1949 the United States had demobilized most of its troops, but in 1950 a North-Korean army attacked South Korea.

A United Nations Command was established and for the first time in history an organized international force was fighting aggression, although in actual terms more than 90% of the troops were either American or South Korean.

The course of the Korean War was bitter, bloody and frustrating. After long negotiations a truce was reached in the summer of 1953. By that time the United States had sent a quarter of a million men half way round the world and had left more than 30,000 dead soldiers as evidence of its determination to oppose any sort of Communist aggression in defence of "free peoples".

Vietnam

The Korean armistice did not end the troubles in Asia. By the spring of 1954 a coalition of Vietnamese Communists and nationalists was clearly winning its eight-year war against France's attempt to maintain its colonial rule over Indochina. Conferences in Geneva with the participation of France, the Soviet Union, England, the United States and several Asian nations divided French Indochina into three nations: Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, with Vietnam temporarily divided at the 17th parallel into North and South Vietnam and with elections about uniting

them scheduled for July 1956. These elections were never held.

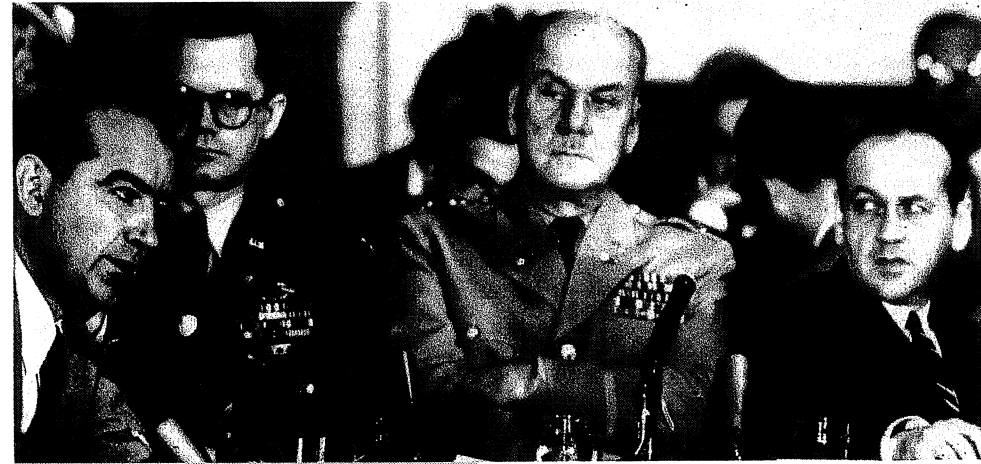
Whereas Korea was fairly isolated, Vietnam was not. If the United States dismissed its interests here the whole of Indochina would be lost to the "wrong side" and with it Burma, Thailand, Malaya and Indonesia. This scenario is also called the Domino theory: if one country fell to the "Comms" all the neighbouring ones would follow.

McCarthyism - "Reds under the Beds"

As always foreign and domestic affairs were closely linked. The fear of Communism abroad had its parallel at home. The American public became alarmed during the late 40s and early 50s when it was disclosed that several people with Communist sympathies had held government positions. This gave rise to a widespread fear that America might be "attacked from within".

The following "witch-hunt" for Communists in American institutions such as government, civil service and the army was led by the unscrupulous and until then unknown Senator Joseph McCarthy from Wisconsin. His wild accusations, often without a shred of evidence, disrupted, if not ruined, the lives of many prominent as well as non-prominent Americans.

As early as 1938 the HUAC (House Un-American Activities Committee) had been established in order to investigate subversive attitudes and actions. From 1951 this committee was chaired by McCarthy. The investigations reached into the movie business: Charlie Chaplin for one felt so harassed that he fled the country and settled in Switzerland. He was never to return to America again. Numerous writers, singers and other artists and intellectuals were brought before the Committee, and the "Red Scare" practically



Joseph McCarthy during one of his animated speeches. The reaction of his audience is obvious.

ruled the country in those years.

The downfall of McCarthy came about in the spring of 1954 after the hearings had been televised for two months. His tactics became too obvious, and he was accused of wrongdoing against the State and had to leave the Senate, but too late for many who had lost jobs and positions.

McCarthyism is treated by several authors of the period: in Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* (1953), Norman Mailer's *The Deer Park* (1955) Bernard Malamud's *A New Life* (1961), and in Shirley Jackson's short story "The Lottery" (1949). All these works in different ways stress the randomness, the general mistrust and the disillusion.

Bomb-testing

Another fear was the atom bomb fear. One chapter of atomic development ended in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, another was about

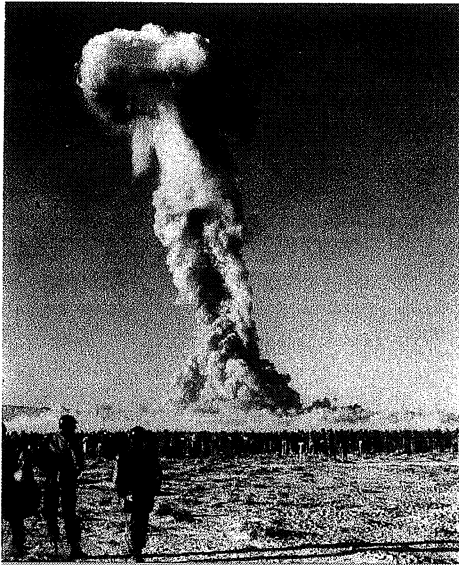
to begin. In 1945 the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) was set up to make sure that "atomic power can become a powerful and forceful influence towards the maintenance of world peace".

When the Soviet Union test-exploded their first bomb in September 1949 the nuclear arms race began, and the following years saw extensive expansion of testbomb sites as well as commercial reactor projects. Although controlled by the AEC nuclear reactors have always been privately owned.

One of the biggest test sites was and is the Nevada desert, where nuclear tests have been undertaken since 1951 - and for many years without fallout precautions.

Radiation danger was not recognized till the summer of 1953 when it was learned that in April heavy rains in New York had brought down debris from Nevada tests. The same was the case with the Bikini Atolls - the radiation danger was not recognized till it was too late, and the islands are still impossible to live in.

Fallout became an issue in the presidential



Army troops observing the detonation of an atomic bomb at the Nevada test site, 1951. (U.S. AEC)

election in 1956, but it was not till well into the 60s that it had any momentum, and it was not till 1987 that military personnel, present under order at the testbombings in the fifties, began to sue for compensation for possible injuries. So there is still a long way to go for the Indians of the test site areas and for the natives of the Bikinis.

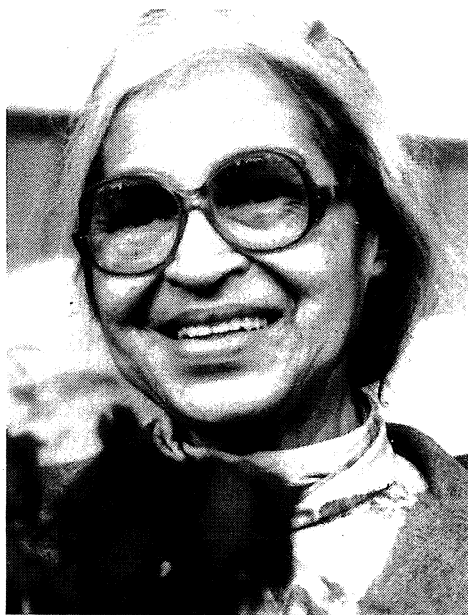
Civil Rights

As mentioned earlier many black workers from the South sought better conditions in the more openminded North.

The outstanding development in civil rights during this period was the Supreme Court decision of 1954, which said that state or local laws requiring separate (segregated) schools for black and white children were unconstitutional. Since public schools in most states were not officially segregated this ruling ap-

plied mainly to Southern states where it met strong opposition. The test case became Little Rock, Arkansas (1956), where finally the military had to accompany about 20 children to an otherwise white school.

But education was not the only segregated section of American society: restaurants, toilets, and public facilities including public transport were all segregated. In the same year Martin Luther King (see p. 233) became known all over America for organizing the first bus boycott protesting against segregation. Again the Supreme Court ruled segregation unconstitutional and the Civil Rights Move-



Rosa Parks who in 1956 initiated the American Civil Rights Movement by refusing to give up her seat to a white person in a segregated bus in the Southern state of Alabama. (Foto: AP/Nordisk Pressefoto)



ment had dawned. "Freedom riders" went by bus to the South to force desegregation, sit-ins were organized in bars and restaurants (by the SNCC: Students' Non-violent Coordinating Committee), all strictly non-violent actions according to the ideology of Ghandi (see p. 301) and here continued by Martin Luther King.

Mass Culture

The new medium of television played an important role in the downfall of McCarthy and in the spreading of Martin Luther King's message. In 1949 940,000 American families had a television set. Ten years later the figure was 44 million.

During the 50s the centre of TV production

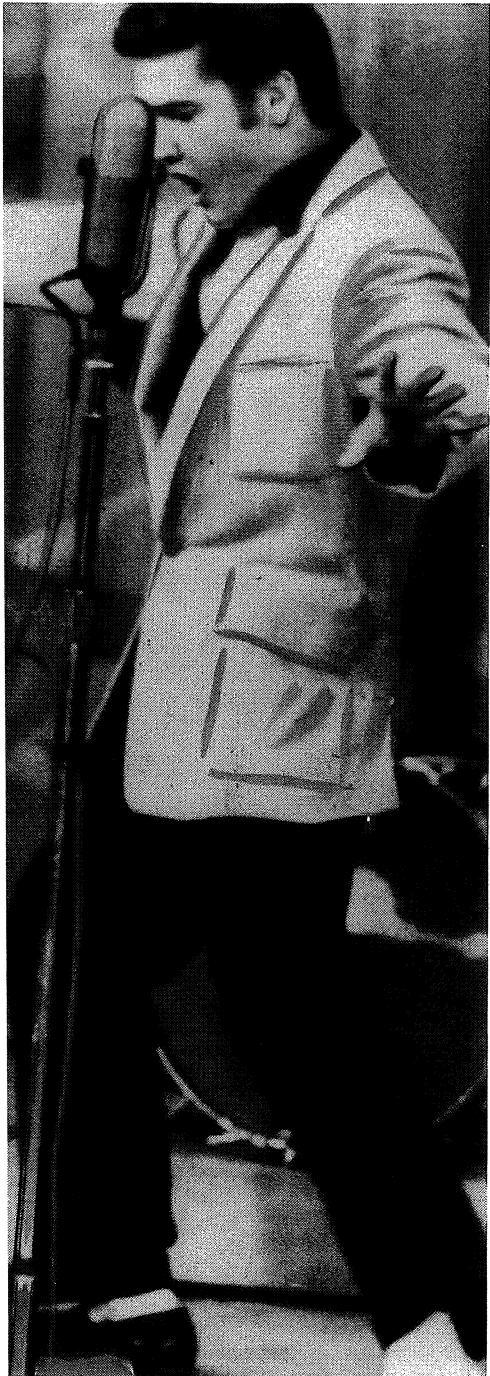
moved from New York to Hollywood, and soap operas and shows about the suburban family (*I Love Lucy*) came into people's drawing rooms and kept them away from the cinemas, in spite of the fact that films in the 50s featured stars like James Dean, Marlon Brando and Marilyn Monroe.

Teenagers became a consumer group to be seriously considered and in this connection two more American inventions must be mentioned: the LP record introduced in 1948 and the transistor radio. Together they provided background music for everyone everywhere. New on the scene in 1954 was Elvis Presley who spellbound the young and outraged their parents with his combination of country and black music and his rocking and rolling movements. His "Heartbreak Hotel" sold 14 million copies in 1956 and in 1955 Bill Haley had the hit of the year with his "Rock around the Clock". Rock'n roll was there to stay!

Young people were not just copying their parents' consumerism in these years. Many were actually turning their backs on it. The end of the 50s saw the Beat generation who were young people who objected to the materialism and the puritanism of the suburbs. They felt beaten by society and they loved the beat of music, notably jazz and rhythm and blues.

COLORED ENTRANCE





Elvis Presley in action. To the parent-generation he was scandalous; to their teen-age children he was exciting and wonderfully sexy.

Literature

In the literature of the fifties it was not so much the "prosperity" label as the "anxiety" label that was most fitting. The Second World War produced a large number of war novels, all belonging to the naturalistic tradition. Examples are *From Here to Eternity* (1951) by **James Jones** (1921-) about army life in Hawaii just before the Pearl Harbour attack, *The Young Lions* (1948) by **Irwin Shaw** (1914-) which follows the fates of two American soldiers of whom one is a Jew, and of the Nazi soldier who kills the Jew and is himself killed by the non-Jew, and lastly *The Naked and the Dead* (1948) by **Norman Mailer** (1923-) (see also p. 244) about the futility of war. It deals with an American platoon holding a Japanese island despite heavy losses. The ethics of war are discussed and challenged, and the Japanese are eventually defeated independent of the efforts of the platoon.

American authors in the fifties show that they are very uncomfortable in the post-war world. The great political fears are less important to them than their own psychological problems in the new post-war American society. Many writers in this period try to find the answer to the old question "Who am I"; and several black as well as Jewish-American writers find the answer by looking at their own racial and cultural backgrounds. Others explore the ideas of modern philosophy and psychology and members of the Beat generation use eastern religions for the same purpose.

The South

The central theme of the writers of the South is isolation and search for the self. On the surface **Flannery O'Connor's** (1925-64) stories and novels are filled with horrible events and

grotesque characters – this makes her typical of the Southern "Gothic" school of writing. Her fiction suggests, however, the reality of another world, and that other world is the religious world. In her famous short story "A Good Man Is Hard To Find" (1955) even the murderer of a Southern family is seen to be one of God's children. In both her novels *Wise Blood* (1952) and *The Violent Bear It Away* (1960) we find religious allegories.

The stories and novels of **Carson McCullers** (1917-67) also clearly belong to the Southern Gothic tradition. Pain is locked up in most of her characters like a secret. The readers are rarely asked to share the pain, merely to see that it is there. The tragedy of lives lived in loneliness and lovelessness is depicted in her novel *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* (1940) and in her best known short stories "The Ballad of the Sad Café" and "The Jockey" (1951).

Truman Capote's (1924-84) early work belongs to the Southern Gothic tradition as well. *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (1948) and *The Grass Harp* (1951) are beautiful, painful stories about young boys growing up in the South. In his best known book *In Cold Blood* (1966), the terrifying story about how a whole family was murdered, Truman Capote makes use of a kind of non-fiction or documentary also popular with Norman Mailer.

Jewish-American Writers

In the 40s and 50s the Jewish-American novel grew in importance. These novels looked at the spiritual and psychological problems of the mid-century in a new way. They brought new interest in old problems of morality, but most of all they brought the humour of self-criticism and irony.

Both **Saul Bellow's** (1915-) first two novels are existentialist (man is completely

alone in a meaningless world with no God or moral laws to direct his choices): *Dangling Man* (1944) and *The Victim* (1947). The main character in *Herzog* (1965), Bellow's best known novel, also searches for a meaning in life. Bellow's novels became a model for many new writers in the fifties. He created the new hero living actively inside his own mind, searching for answers there rather than in the outside world.

Bernard Malamud (1914-1986) also begins writing in the 50s and from his second novel *The Assistant* (1957) he turns to his own Jewish background. In the short story "The Jewbird" (1961) humour and tragedy contrast, and he treats his Jewish background with gentle irony. *The Magic Barrel* (1958) and *Idiot's First* (1963) are collections of short stories all dealing with the unhappy experiences of Jews.

J.D. Salinger (1919-) is a typical 50s writer almost of the Angry Young Men School (see p. 89). He wrote only one novel *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) in which he depicts the unhappy teenager running away from school, running away from his parents, desperately wanting to preserve innocence – his own and that of others – and refusing to believe in the false, adult world. The rest of Salinger's work is a series of short stories about a warm hearted Jewish-Irish family, among others "A Perfect Day for Banana Fish" from *Nine Stories* (1953) and *Franny and Zooey* (1961).

The Beat Generation

The Beats were the new rebel-heroes (described by Norman Mailer in *The White Negro*, 1957). Creating literature was a kind of performance. It showed people how deeply they felt. They often shouted their poetry in coffee houses with jazz being played in the background. An example of this kind of work

is **Allen Ginsberg's** (1926-) *Howl and Other Poems* (1956). He uses free-form poetry to praise the free life-style. His message invariably defends drug-taking and homosexuality or attacks American society and politics. He has always been interested in Zen-Buddhism and makes use of the Zen ideas of spontaneity in his poetry.

The same goes for **Jack Kerouac** (1922-69). In his novel *On the Road* (1957) he brings together all the predominant themes of the Beats. It is a story about a group of Beats who travel across America. Symbolically it is a trip from the unfree city to the emotional, spiritual and physical freedom of the West.

In later novels *Dharma Bums* (1958) and *Desolation Angels* (1965) he also describes people on the road to freedom. But their trips have a deeper religious meaning. They are inner journeys to the meaning of life. Both writers clearly foreshadow the counter cultures of the 60s (see p. 231).

Black Writers

Up till the forties black writers had showed the black man as a victim of white violence. **Richard Wright's** (1906-60) *Native Son* (1940) changed this. Wright uses naturalist techniques to describe the social and psychological pressures on his black hero Bigger Thomas. The novel frightened and shocked many white readers, but Wright wanted to show that the social situation of blacks may cause them to become violent too.

In his short story "The Man Who Lived Underground" (1945) Wright created the metaphor of blacks being invisible in American society. This is carried on by **Ralph Ellison** (1914-) in his unique *Invisible Man* (1952).

According to Ellison whites cannot see blacks as individuals. Whites only see their



Vivien Leigh and Marlon Brando in Tennessee Williams' *A Street Car Named Desire*. (Camera Press/Politiken Pressefoto)

own stupid and prejudiced idea of what a black person is. The hero in a homeless, black individual living in a hole in New York City. He is invisible because people only see "surroundings, themselves or figments of their imagination."

In the writings of **James Baldwin** (1924-1987) we see the rising anger of blacks. *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) describes how race, sex and religion influence the lives of people in a small church in Harlem. The religious emotions destroy people's ability to see the real world. In *Another Country* (1962) Baldwin begins to describe the moral confusion and race hatred of American cities, and in his collection of essays *The Fire Next Time* (1963) and his play *Blues for Mr. Charlie* (1964) this anger explodes. It is difficult not to connect these writers with the Civil Rights Movement of the 50s and 60s, and sometimes

their literary works are interpreted more as black propaganda than as literature.

Drama

Tennessee Williams (1912-83) was brought up in the South. He takes the alienation of modern man as a basic theme – the isolated individual, who does not belong to any group: "we are all sentenced to solitary confinement inside our own skins – for life". This goes for both Laura and her brother in *The Glass Menagerie* (1945) and for Blanche in *A Street-car Named Desire* (1947). Often the moral sickness of the South is described in sexual terms. Such aspects as brutality and immorality are strong in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955) and *Suddenly Last Summer* (1958). The three last mentioned have all been made into films. Williams' tragedies are not ordinary every-day tragedies. They are "Gothic" because they



Arthur Miller with his wife, the actress Marilyn Monroe.
(Politikens Pressefoto)

show the horrors of the soul. From his first to his last plays Williams seems to see life as a game which cannot be won; his America is far from being a Protestant Anglo-Saxon America, it is richly immigrant but without prejudice or complaints.

Whereas the world of Tennessee Williams is ruled by irrational forces, the world of **Arthur Miller** (1915-) is quite rational. His plays are rather similar to the plays of Henrik Ibsen, especially his first play *All My Sons* (1947). Little by little false ideas of reality are erased and the underlying truth comes out. These elements can also be seen in his best known play *Death of a Salesman* (1949). All the failures of the main character Willy

Loman come from false dreams – about himself and about his sons. One of these false dreams is the American Dream of financial success. Desperately wanting to be successful and accepted, even liked, Willy becomes a victim to the false values of society and cannot cope with his own failure, or, as he sees it, the failure of the elder of his two sons. *The Crucible* is also note-worthy (1953). Although set in 17th century New England during the witch-hunts in Salem, it has a direct relevance to McCarthyism and the "Red Scare"; or any similar "witch-hunt" for that matter. It is an immensely powerful play both in its 17th century setting and in its more allegorical interpretation.

The U.S.A. 1960 - 1973

The technological and economic expansion in the United States continued from the 1950s into the 1960s, even faster, in fact, than before: the continuing industrialization, the expanding economy, the movement to the suburbs (of the white middle class), the consumer goods – and the war economy.

But the 1960s was also a period of chaotic change. Almost all aspects of human and social life were questioned during the years between 1960 and 1973 by groups who felt left outside the "American Dream": Blacks, women and young people in particular. But the revolt of the sixties was not based upon one shared, revolutionary ideology or programme. It was rather a *mood* of protest against the existing system. And meanwhile many Americans – the majority – kept living their lives and dreaming their dreams as if nothing had happened.

Surprisingly many writers did the same. Much literature of the period was still very "private" and not at all new or revolutionary. Still, some of the protesting groups did enter the literary market, particularly blacks and women, but it was the music of the period that most clearly registered the 1960s mood.