The outline of the period

In many respects the period between the end of World War I and the end of World War II was one of sharp discontinuities. Few eras in American history present such vivid contrasts compressed into so short a time.

Politically, the nation experienced what many considered a fundamental change after the election of 1920. For a full decade, the government remained in the hands of the Republican party and—for eight of those years at least—in the hands of two conservative presidents who rejected most of the liberal assumptions of the progressive era. An age of reform seemed to have given way to an era of reaction.

Economically, the nation experienced equally profound shifts. Beginning in 1921 the American economy embarked on a period of growth without precedent in the history of the world. The nation's industrial capacity grew rapidly; the income of its citizens soared; America's position in world trade became one of unrivaled supremacy. And the American corporate world, after having been on the defensive for many years, basked in a widespread public popularity that turned once-despised captains of industry into national heroes. Then, starting with a dramatic stock market crash in 1929, the imposing economic edifice collapsed, and the country entered the worst economic crisis in its history. Industrial production declined; new investment virtually ceased; unemployment reached epic proportions.

Culturally, there seemed to be equally sharp contrasts. In the 1920s a bitter conflict emerged between the forces of modernism associated with the new urban-industrial society and the forces of traditionalism associated with more provincial, often rural communities. On issues such as prohibition, religion, and race, the tensions between the new society and the old were vividly displayed. In the 1930s, by contrast, the nation's outlook appeared to shift dramatically. Cultural divisions now seemed less important than economic ones, and the controversies of the 1930s centered less on questions of values than on questions of wealth and power.

Americans in the 1920s experienced a series of profound changes in the way they lived and thought. A new urban culture emerged that helped people in all regions to live their lives and perceive their world in increasingly similar ways; and it exposed them to a new set of values that reflected the prosperity and complexity of the modern economy.

To a generation of artists and intellectuals coming of age in the 1920s, the new society in which they lived was even more disturbing. Many were experiencing a disenchantment with modern America so fundamental that they were often able to view it only with contempt. As a result, they adopted a role sharply different from that of most intellectuals of earlier eras. Rather than involving themselves with their society's popular or political culture and attempting to influence and reform the mass of their countrymen, they isolated themselves and embarked on a restless search for personal fulfillment. Gertrude Stein once referred to the young Americans emerging from World War I as a "Lost Generation." For many writers and intellectuals, at least, it was an apt description.

At the heart of the Lost Generation's critique of modern society was a sense of personal alienation, a belief that contemporary America no longer provided the individual with avenues by which he or she could achieve personal fulfillment. Modern life, they argued, was cold, impersonal, materialistic, and thus meaningless. The sensitive individual could find no happiness in the mainstream of American society.

This disillusionment had its roots in many things, but in nothing so deeply as the experience of World War I. To those who had fought in France and experienced the horror and savagery of modern warfare—and even to those who had not fought but who nevertheless had been aware of the appalling costs of the struggle—the aftermath of the conflict was shattering. Nothing, it seemed, had been gained. The war had been a fraud; the suffering and the dying had been in vain. Ernest Hemingway, one of the most celebrated (and most commercially successful) of the new breed of writers, expressed the generation's contempt for the war in his novel *A Farewell to Arms* (1929). Its hero, an American officer fighting in Europe, decides that there is no justification for his participation in the conflict and deserts the army with a nurse with whom he has fallen in love. Hemingway made it clear that he was to be admired for doing so.

At least equally dispiriting was the character of the nation these young intellectuals found on their return home at war's end. It was, they believed, a society utterly lacking in vision or idealism, obsessed with materialism, steeped in outmoded, priggish morality. Worst of all, it was one in which the individual had lost the ability to control his or her own fate. It was a sleek, new, industrialized and professionalized world that was organized in a dehumanizing way.

Intellectuals of the 1920s turned their backs on the traditional goals of their parents. They claimed to reject the "success ethic" that they believed dominated American life (even though many of them hoped for—and a few achieved—commercial and critical success on their own terms). F. Scott Fitzgerald, whose first novel, *This Side of Paradise* (1920), established him as a spokesman for his generation, ridiculed the American obsession with material success in *The Great Gatsby* (1925), The novel's hero, Jay Gatsby, spends his life accumulating wealth and social prestige in order to win the woman he loves. The world to which he has aspired, however, turns out to be one of pretension, fraud, and cruelty, and Gatsby is ultimately destroyed by it. Fitzgerald and his intellectual contemporaries claimed to want nothing to do with conventional American society (although Fitzgerald himself seemed at the same time desperately to crave acceptance by it). They chose, instead, to search elsewhere for fulfillment.

Their quest took them in several different directions, often at the same time. Many Lost Generation intellectuals left America to live in France, making Paris for a time a center of American artistic life. Some adopted hedonistic life styles, indulging in conspicuous debauchery: drinking, drugs, casual sex, wild parties, and a generally flamboyant way of life. (The publicity they received helped set the tone for other less alienated members of their generation, who began to imitate this uninhibited pursuit of pleasure.) Many intellectuals resorted to an outspoken self-absorption, openly repudiating any responsibility for anyone but themselves. For most of these young men and women, however, the only real refuge from the travails of modern society was art—not art for any social purpose, but art for its own sake. Only art, they argued, could allow them full individual expression; only the act of creation could offer them fulfillment.

The result of this quest for fulfillment through art was not, for the most part, personal satisfaction for the writers and artists involved. They remained throughout the 1920s a restless, usually unhappy generation, searching in vain for contentment. They did, however, produce a body of work that made the decade one of the great eras of American art. Most notable were the writers: Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Lewis, as well as others such as Thomas Wolfe, John Dos Passos, Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, and Eugene O'Neill—the first great American playwright and the only one ever to win a Nobel Prize. T. S. Eliot, a native of Boston who spent most of his adult life in England, led a generation of poets in breaking with the romanticism of the nineteenth century. His epic work *The Waste Land* (1922) brought to poetry much of the harsh tone of despair that was invading other areas of literature.

The writers of the 1920s were notable not only for the effectiveness of their critiques but for their success in pioneering new literary styles and techniques. Some incorporated Freudian psychology into their work, using literature to explore the workings of the psyche as well as the external actions of characters. Others produced innovations in form, structure, and dialogue: Ernest Hemingway, with his spare, clean prose; Sinclair Lewis, with his biting satire; John Dos Passos, with his use of the techniques of journalism as well as of literature. The literature of the 1920s was escapist; but it was also intensely creative, even revolutionary.

The term “Lost Generation” was coined by Gertrude Stein to refer to a group of American literary notables who lived in Paris from the time period which saw the end of World War I to the beginning of the Great Depression. Significant members included Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ezra Pound, Sherwood Anderson, Waldo Peirce, Sylvia Beach, T.S. Eliot, and Gertrude Stein herself. It would be Hemingway who would popularize the term, quoting Stein, “You are all a lost generation,” as an epigraph to his novel, *The Sun Also Rises*.

The “Lost Generation” were said to be disillusioned by the large number of casualties of the Great World War, cynical, disdainful of the Victorian notions of morality and propriety of their elders. It was somewhat common among members of this group to complain that American artistic culture lacked the extensiveness of European work, which lead to many members spending large amounts of time in Europe. They also complained that all topics worth treating in a literary work had already been covered. No matter, this period would see an explosion in American literature and art, which is now considered to include some of the greatest literary classics produced by American writers. This generation also produced the first flowering of jazz music, arguably the first distinct American art form. The enriching gifts from the Lost Generation included: *The Great Gatsby* (F. Scott Fitzgerald), *The Waste Land* (T. S. Eliot), *The Sun Also Rises* (Ernest Hemingway), *Babbitt* (Sinclair Lewis), *The Sound and the Fury* (William Faulkner), among many others.

**F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896-1940),**

F. Scott Fitzgerald was born Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald on September 24, 1896. Fitzgerald is regarded as one of the greatest American writers of the twentieth century. He would write four novels, leave a fifth unfinished, and write dozens of short stories with the common themes of youth, despair, and age. Many admire what they consider his remarkable emotional honesty. His heroes were handsome, confident, and doomed, blazing brilliantly before exploding, his heroines are usually beautiful, intricate, and alluring.

*This Side of Paradise* is the debut novel of F. Scott Fitzgerald. Published in 1920, and taking its title from a line of the Rupert Brooke poem *Tiare Tahiti*, the book examines the lives and morality of post-World War I youth. Its protagonist, Amory Blaine, is a wealthy and attractive Princeton University student who dabbles in literature and has a series of romances that eventually lead to his disillusionment. In his later novels, Fitzgerald would further develop the book's theme of love warped by greed and status-seeking. Many consider Amory Blaine to be at least partially based on Fitzgerald himself, who, like Amory, attended Princeton University before joining the Army. Also, Fitzgerald named the protagonist in his novel "This Side of Paradise" Amory Blaine in reference to Hobey Baker, a member of Princeton's class of 1914. Baker was a star athlete in football and hockey who died in a plane crash just weeks after the end of the war in Europe in 1918.

The 1920s proved the most influential decade of Fitzgerald’s development. *The Great Gatsby* was first published on April 10, 1926, and set in New York City and Long Island during the 1920s. The novel was not popular when it was first published, selling fewer than 24,000 copies during Fitzgerald’s lifetime. Largely forgotten due to the Great Depression and then World War II, it was republished in the 1950s and quickly found a wide readership. Over the following decades the novel has emerged as a standard text in high school and university courses in literature around the world, and is often cited as one of the greatest English-language novels of the 20th Century, as well as one of the greatest American literature pieces ever written.

The story centers around Jay Gatsby, the title character, who is a young millionaire with a mysterious and somewhat notorious past. He’s famous for throwing glamorous parties attended by high society. Gatsby has no ties to the society of the rich in which he circulates and is a lonely man. All he really wants is to repeat the past, and that’s to be reunited with the love of his life, Daisy. The reader learns that Daisy is the primary reason he pursued a life of money, the other being that he wanted to escape from the life of his father, poverty. But Daisy has moved on and is married to respectable millionaire Tom Buchanan. The narrator is Nick Carraway, an apprentice Wall Street trader in the rising financial markets of the early 1920s, who is also Daisy’s second cousin. Carraway lives in the small bungalow next to the mansion owned by Gatsby. He quickly meets and befriends Gatsby, and thus becomes the liaison between him and Daisy. Carraway is cynical of the rich, as respectable as they may seem superficially; he feels that they are careless people. One afternoon, after a confrontation between Tom and Gatsby over Gatsby’s love for Daisy, as well as Gatsby’s past actions and present intentions, Daisy runs over Myrtle, Tom’s mistress, while driving back from the city with Gatsby in Gatsby’s bright yellow car. Tom misleads Myrtle’s heartbroken husband George, implying that the accident was Gatsby’s fault to punish Tom for marrying Daisy. In a fit of rage, George goes to Gatsby’s house with his gun, shoots Gatsby and then commits suicide. Hardly anyone, even Daisy, attends Gatsby’s funeral. Carraway, Gatsby’s sole friend, attends with Gatsby’s father, a poor farmer. Gatsby is buried with the same mystery in which he suddenly appeared. At the end of the book, Carraway decides to move back out West, as he feels that the East is too corrupt for him. He is left to ponder The American Dream and what it is that makes us continue to strive for our goals.

The themes Fitzgerald uses with the American dream and the focus on the wealthy citizens of America, the notion of opulence with the attempt to gain wealth is apparent through Gatsby’s extravagant and lavish parties. This also carried over into Fitzgerald’s own life. While his passion lay in writing novels, they never sold well enough to support the opulent lifestyle that he and his wife, Zelda, adopted as New York celebrities. To support this lifestyle, Fitzgerald turned to writing short stories submitting them to magazines and was frequently in financial trouble and often required loans from his literary agent and his editor at Scribner’s.

Other fine works include *Tender Is the Night* (1934), about a young psychiatrist whose life is doomed by his marriage to an unstable woman, and some stories in the collections *Flappers and Philosophers* (1920), *Tales of the Jazz Age* (1922), and *All the Sad Young Men* (1926). More than any other writer, Fitzgerald captured the glittering, desperate life of the 1920s; *This Side of Paradise* was heralded as the voice of modern American youth. His second novel, *The Beautiful and the Damned* (1922), continued his exploration of the self-destructive extravagance of his times.

**Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961)**

Ernest Hemingway was born on July 21, 1899 in Oak Park, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago. The influence of Hemingway’s writings on American literature was considerable and continues today. His distinctive writing style is characterized by terse minimalism and understatement and had a significant influence on the development of twentieth century fiction. Hemingway’s protagonists are on average stoics, often seen as projections of his own character, where men who must show a grace under pressure persona. Heading into the 21st century, many of Hemingway’s works are now considered classics in the canon of American literature. His influence of style has been so widespread that it can be glimpsed in most contemporary fiction, as writers draw inspiration either from Hemingway himself or indirectly through writers who more consciously emulated Hemingway’s style. In his own time, Hemingway affected writers within his modernist literary circle.

A *Soldier’s Home* tells the story of a soldier’s return from World War I and how he is mentally scarred by his experiences. The story explores the effect of the war on Harold Krebs and his apparent numbness to the world around him. *A Soldier’s Home* is not only a commentary on the horrible aspects of war and the human psyche, but also a commentary on society’s attitudes towards war. This is shown through the actions of the other characters in relation to Krebs, and their efforts to change him. The sacrifice that Krebs made for his country is never appreciated during the story. After the war, there was a celebration and immediately afterwards the soldiers were expected to rejoin society and be productive members, essentially denying that the event even happened. Krebs is thrust back into his capitalist society, where the atrocities of the war are never questioned or reviled. The war has removed any semblance of humanity from Krebs, who can not relate to anyone, even his own mother who’s not interested in his sacrifice. Krebs deals with his sister abstractly, but is appreciative of her innocence as a young child. Krebs sees himself as a unit, a soldier, and can not re-attain his feelings. His speech is void of description, and refers to himself as one does in the army, by his last name. This makes *Soldier’s Home* not only a commentary on how war can dehumanize the human mind, but also an exploration of how society reacts to this new mind in an industrialist manner.

Real success came to this writer after he had published his first novel "The Sun Also Rises" (or "Fiesta").The novel is a powerful insight into the lives and values of the "Lost Generation", chronicling the experiences of Jake Barnes and several acquaintances on their pilgrimage to Pamplona for the annual *fiesta* and bull fights. Barnes suffered an injury during World War I which makes him unable to consummate a sexual relationship with Brett Ashley. The story follows Jake and his various companions across France and Spain. Initially, Jake seeks peace away from Brett by taking a fishing trip to Burguete, deep within the Spanish hills, with companion Bill Gorton, another veteran of the war. The *fiesta* in Pamplona is the setting for the eventual meeting of all the characters, who play out their various desires and anxieties, alongside a great deal of drinking.

**William Faulkner (1897-1962)**

Born to an old southern family, William Harrison Faulkner was raised in Oxford, Mississippi, where he lived most of his life. Faulkner created an entire imaginative landscape, Yoknapatawpha County, mentioned in numerous novels, along with several families with interconnections extending back for generations. Yoknapatawpha County, with its capital, "Jefferson," is closely modeled on Oxford, Mississippi, and its surroundings. Faulkner re-creates the history of the land and the various races -- Indian, African-American, Euro-American, and various mixtures -- who have lived on it. An innovative writer, Faulkner experimented brilliantly with narrative chronology, different points of view and voices (including those of outcasts, children, and illiterates), and a rich and demanding baroque style built of extremely long sentences full of complicated subordinate parts.

The novel *The Sound and the Fury* takes place in the fictional Yoknapatawpha County and is split into four sections. The first is from the viewpoint of Benjy Compson, a thirty-three year old man with mental retardation. The second segment is from the point of view of Quentin Compson, the Harvard-educated student who commits suicide after a series of events involving his sister Caddy. The third is from the point of view of their cynical, embittered brother, Jason, and the fourth is from a third person limited narrative point-of-view focused on Dilsey, the Compson family's black servant, and her unbiased point of view, which allows the reader to make his or her own assumptions from the actions of the other characters. The story overall summarizes the lives of people in the Compson family that has by now fallen into ruin. Many passages are written in a stream of consciousness. This novel is a classic example of the unreliable narrator technique.

The best of Faulkner's novels include *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and *As I Lay Dying* (1930), two modernist works experimenting with viewpoint and voice to probe southern families under the stress of losing a family member; *Light in August* (1932), about complex and violent relations between a white woman and a black man; and *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), perhaps his finest, about the rise of a self-made plantation owner and his tragic fall through racial prejudice and a failure to love.

Most of these novels use different characters to tell parts of the story and demonstrate how meaning resides in the manner of telling, as much as in the subject at hand. The use of various viewpoints makes Faulkner more self-referential, or "reflexive," than Hemingway or Fitzgerald; each novel reflects upon itself, while it simultaneously unfolds a story of universal interest. Faulkner's themes are southern tradition, family, community, the land, history and the past, race, and the passions of ambition and love. He also created three novels focusing on the rise of a degenerate family, the Snopes clan: *The Hamlet* (1940), *The Town* (1957), and *The Mansion* (1959).

**Sinclair Lewis (1885-1951)**

Harry Sinclair Lewis was born in Sauk Centre, Minnesota, and graduated from Yale University. He took time off from school to work at a socialist community, Helicon Home Colony, financed by muckraking novelist Upton Sinclair. Lewis's *Main Street* (1920) satirized monotonous, hypocritical small-town life in Gopher Prairie, Minnesota. His incisive presentation of American life and his criticism of American materialism, narrowness, and hypocrisy brought him national and international recognition. In 1926, he was offered and declined a Pulitzer Prize for *Arrowsmith* (1925), a novel tracing a doctor's efforts to maintain his medical ethics amid greed and corruption. In 1930, he became the first American to win the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Lewis's other major novels include *Babbitt* (1922). George Babbitt is an ordinary businessman living and working in Zenith, an ordinary American town. Babbitt is moral and enterprising, and a believer in business as the new scientific approach to modern life. Becoming restless, he seeks fulfillment but is disillusioned by an affair with a bohemian woman, returns to his wife, and accepts his lot. The novel added a new word to the American language -- "babbittry," meaning narrow-minded, complacent, bourgeois ways. *Elmer Gantry* (1927) exposes revivalist religion in the United States, while *Cass Timberlane* (1945) studies the stresses that develop within the marriage of an older judge and his young wife.

**John Dos Passos (1896-1970)**

Like Sinclair Lewis, John Dos Passos began as a left-wing radical but moved to the right as he aged. Dos Passos wrote realistically, in line with the doctrine of socialist realism. His best work achieves a scientific objectivism and almost documentary effect. Dos Passos developed an experimental collage technique for his masterwork *U.S.A.*, consisting of *The 42nd Parallel* (1930), 1919 (1932), and *The Big Money* (1936). This sprawling collection covers the social history of the United States from 1900 to 1930 and exposes the moral corruption of materialistic American society through the lives of its characters.

Dos Passos's new techniques included "newsreel" sections taken from contemporary headlines, popular songs, and advertisements, as well as "biographies" briefly setting forth the lives of important Americans of the period, such as inventor Thomas Edison, labor organizer Eugene Debs, film star Rudolph Valentino, financier J.P. Morgan, and sociologist Thorstein Veblen. Both the newsreels and biographies lend Dos Passos's novels a documentary value; a third technique, the "camera eye," consists of stream of consciousness prose poems that offer a subjective response to the events described in the books.

John Dos Passos expressed America's postwar disillusionment in the novel *Three Soldiers* (1921), when he noted that civilization was a "vast edifice of sham, and the war, instead of its crumbling, was its fullest and most ultimate expression." Shocked and permanently changed, Americans returned to their homeland but could never regain their innocence.

It is one of the key American war novels of the First World War, and remains a classic of the realist war novel genre. H.L. Mencken, then practising primarily as an American literary critic, praised the book in the pages of the *Smart Set*. "Until *Three Soldiers* is forgotten and fancy achieves its inevitable victory over fact, no war story can be written in the United States without challenging comparison with it--and no story that is less meticulously true land of fat will stand up to it. At one blast it disposed of oceans of romance and blather.

It changed the whole tone of American opinion about the war; it even changed the recollections of actual veterans of the war.

They saw, no doubt, substantially what Dos Passos saw, but it took his bold realism to disentangle their recollections from the prevailing buncombe and sentimentality."

**Sherwood Anderson (1876-1941)**

Sherwood Anderson was born in Camden, Ohio on September 13, 1876. Growing up, Anderson and his family moved around frequently before finally settling in Clyde, Ohio. An American writer, mainly of short stories, probably his most famous collection of works, which he began in 1915, was *Winesburg, Ohio*.

Published in 1919, it is a collection of related short stories, which could be loosely defined as a novel. The stories are centered on the central character George Willard and the fictional inhabitants of the town of Winesburg, Ohio. As a child Anderson grew up in Clyde, Ohio, and Clyde would serve as the model for his fictional town of Winesburg. The work explores the theme of loneliness and frustration in small-town America. Anderson’s writing often seems disjointed and tentative, a style that lends itself to the half-conscious thoughts and raw emotions of Winesburg’s residents and their inability to express their deepest hopes and fears. The townspeople are grotesques, stunted morally, emotionally, mentally, spiritually, and they are inarticulate. They seem to gravitate toward George, telling him their strange, often sad, stories in the hope that, in writing the stories of their lives, he will be able to impart dignity and meaning to their personal struggles and experiences.

The prose of *Winesburg* is often characterized by a colloquial naturalness which Anderson might have learned from such oral story tellers as his father or Mark Twain, a favorite author of his.

Anderson himself said *Winesburg* “has become a kind of American classic and has been said by many critics to have started a kind of revolution in American short-story writing”.

The critical reception to Winesburg, Ohio upon its publication was positive, but it did not receive a wide readership.

Some people have regarded Anderson as an “American Freudian” and insisted that he was influenced by Freud because *Winesburg* dealt with frustration and repression, often of normal sexual desires. Among the literati, it was very highly regarded, but its sales were modest.

**Ezra Pound (1885-1972)**

Ezra Pound was one of the most influential American poets of this century. From 1908 to 1920, he resided in London, where he associated with many writers, including William Butler Yeats, for whom he worked as a secretary, and T.S. Eliot, whose *Waste Land* he drastically edited and improved. He was a link between the United States and Britain, acting as contributing editor to Harriet Monroe's important Chicago magazine *Poetry* and spearheading the new school of poetry known as Imagism, which advocated a clear, highly visual presentation.

After Imagism, he championed various poetic approaches. He eventually moved to Italy, where he became caught up in Italian Fascism.

Pound furthered Imagism in letters, essays, and an anthology. In a letter to Monroe in 1915, he argues for a modern-sounding, visual poetry that avoids "clichés and set phrases." In "A Few Don'ts of an Imagiste" (1913), he defined "image" as something that "presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time." Pound's 1914 anthology of 10 poets, *Des Imagistes*, offered examples of Imagist poetry by outstanding poets, including William Carlos Williams, H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), and Amy Lowell.

Pound's interests and reading were universal. His adaptations and brilliant, if sometimes flawed, translations introduced new literary possibilities from many cultures to modern writers.

His life-work was *The Cantos*, which he wrote and published until his death.

They contain brilliant passages, but their allusions to works of literature and art from many eras and cultures make them difficult. Pound's poetry is best known for its clear, visual images, fresh rhythms, and muscular, intelligent, unusual lines, such as, in Canto LXXXI, "The ant's a centaur in his dragon world," or in poems inspired by Japanese haiku, such as "In a Station of the Metro" (1916).

**T.S. Eliot (1888-1965)**

Thomas Stearns Eliot was born in St. Louis, Missouri, to a well- to-do family with roots in the northeastern United States. He received the best education of any major American writer of his generation at Harvard College, the Sorbonne, and Merton College of Oxford University. He studied Sanskrit and Oriental philosophy, which influenced his poetry. Like his friend Pound, he went to England early and became a towering figure in the literary world there. One of the most respected poets of his day, his modernist, seemingly illogical or abstract iconoclastic poetry had revolutionary impact. He also wrote influential essays and dramas, and championed the importance of literary and social traditions for the modern poet.

As a critic, Eliot is best remembered for his formulation of the "objective correlative," which he described, in *The Sacred Wood*, as a means of expressing emotion through "a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events" that would be the "formula" of that particular emotion. Poems such as "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1915) embody this approach, when the ineffectual, elderly Prufrock thinks to himself that he has "measured out his life in coffee spoons," using coffee spoons to reflect a humdrum existence and a wasted lifetime. The famous beginning of Eliot's "Prufrock" invites the reader into tawdry alleys that, like modern life, offer no answers to the questions of life.

Similar imagery pervades *The Waste Land* (1922), which echoes Dante's Inferno to evoke London's thronged streets around the time of World War I. *The Waste Land's* vision is ultimately apocalyptic and worldwide. *The Waste Land* is often read as a representation of the disillusionment of the post-war generation. *The Waste Land* is a highly influential 433-line modernist poem, it is perhaps the most famous and most written about long poem of the 20th century, dealing with the decline of civilization and the impossibility of recovering meaning in life. With its slippage between satire and prophecy with abrupt changes of speakers, locations, and times, the melancholic and intimidating summoning up of a vast and unsympathetic range of cultures and literatures. To showcase this, the poem is broken up into five sections: “The Burial of the Dead,” “A Game of Chess,” “The Fire Sermon,” “Death by Water,” and “What the Thunder Said.” The first four sections of the poem correspond to the Greek classical elements of Earth (burial), Air (voices), Fire (passion), and Water. The poem has nonetheless become a familiar touchstone of modern literature. Among its famous phrases are "April is the cruellest month" (its first line); "I will show you fear in a handful of dust"; and the Sanskrit "Shantih shantih shantih" (its last line).In October 1922, Eliot would get *The Waste Land* published in *The Criterion*, and then in book form by December 1922.

The largest form of criticism about Eliot’s *Waste Land* came as being called not real poetry. Another critique concerned Eliot’s widespread use of quotes from other authors into his work. Notes at the end of *Waste Land* give the source of many of the quotes, but not all, reinforcing the argument that Eliot is a plagiarizer. This has been defended as a necessary salvaging of tradition in an age of fragmentation, and completely integral to the work, as well adding richness through unexpected juxtaposition.

Eliot's other major poems include "Gerontion" (1920), which uses an elderly man to symbolize the decrepitude of Western society; "The Hollow Men" (1925), a moving dirge for the death of the spirit of contemporary humanity; *Ash-Wednesday* (1930), in which he turns explicitly toward the Church of England for meaning in human life; and *Four Quartets* (1943), a complex, highly subjective, experimental meditation on transcendent subjects such as time, the nature of self, and spiritual awareness. His poetry, especially his daring, innovative early work, has influenced generations.