The Harlem Renaissance and Modernism: Historical Context

Catastrophic historical events—including a devastating war and a deep economic depression—as well as rapid societal change profoundly affected the writing of this period.

1. A World at War

World War I—the Great War—was perhaps the most influential force on American writers of the early 20th century. The war broke out in Europe in 1914; before it ended in 1918, it involved 32 nations, including the United States, and took the lives of over 20 million people. It was a new kind of war, waged on a massive scale with terrible new weapons that reflected the technological advances of the time—machine guns, poison gases, airplane bombers, and submarines. Old ideals about the purposes and meaning of war were destroyed in the carnage. As Lieutenant Frederic Henry, a character in Ernest Hemingway’s 1929 novel A Farewell to Arms, observed: “Words such as glory, honor, courage, or hallow were obscene.” For many Americans, the war signaled an end to idealism and ushered in an era marked by hedonism, political corruption, and ruthless business practices.

2. The Jazz Age

Some Americans, disillusioned with the traditional values that had led to war, sought escape in the pleasures of entertainment and good times. The 1920s, with its booming economy, became known as the Roaring Twenties. Writer F. Scott Fitzgerald called this decade “the greatest, gaudiest spree in history.” As incomes rose, people were able to spend more money on goods and leisure activities. In addition, many young people began, for the first time, to rebel as a group against the values of the past and the authority of their elders. They experimented with new fashions and new attitudes, actively seeking out fun and freedom.

A NEW ERA FOR WOMEN Women of the period saw their lives change in fundamental ways. In 1920, the passage of the 19th Amendment finally gave women the right to vote. But the vote was just one facet of the changing nature of womanhood. The 1920s saw the emergence of the flapper, an emancipated young woman who embraced new fashions and the urban attitudes of the day. By 1930, ten million American women were earning wages in the workplace—another new frontier. In addition, family life was made increasingly easier by technological innovations, from ready-made clothes to sliced bread. Many women writers, such as Edna St. Vincent Millay and Dorothy Parker, were celebrated as much for their modern lifestyles as for their writing. In turn, they often wrote about the clash between traditional and modern values, celebrating youth, independence, and freedom from social constraints.
JAZZ CULTURE This period also saw the passage of Prohibition (1920–1933), in which alcohol was made illegal. In defiance of this restriction, many people drank in illegal nightclubs called speakeasies, as gangsters made fortunes running and supplying the clubs. At the fancy Cotton Club in New York’s Harlem neighborhood, the guests—all whites—rubbed shoulders with celebrities and gangsters as they listened to the great jazz performers—all blacks—who helped give the era its name: the Jazz Age.

3 The Great Depression

The good times came to a dramatic end when the stock market crashed in October 1929, plunging the nation into economic depression. During the Great Depression, so called for its length and severity, many banks failed, businesses floundered, and workers lost their jobs. By 1933, the unemployment rate had grown to 25 percent. Unable to pay their bills, thousands of people lost their homes, and millions went hungry.

THE DUST BOWL A severe drought that began in the early 1930s added to the nation’s pain. When the drought began, winds picked up dirt from the dry, exhausted fields of the Great Plains. Huge dust storms arose, damaging farms across a 150,000-square-mile region called the Dust Bowl.

Ruined farmers set off with their families to find work, many traveling west to California. Unfortunately, little work was to be found in California, for it, like the rest of the nation, was suffering through the Great Depression. Writers such as John Steinbeck captured the uncertainty and despair of the times: “Carloads, caravans, homeless and hungry; twenty thousand and fifty thousand and a hundred thousand and two hundred thousand. They streamed over the mountains, hungry and restless—restless as ants, scurrying to find work to do.”

THE NEW DEAL The country was desperate for help. During his presidential campaign in 1932, Franklin Delano Roosevelt pledged to give the country a “new deal.” When elected, he fulfilled his promise by enacting various New Deal programs—relief for the homeless and hungry, recovery for agriculture and business, and various economic reforms to prevent such a severe depression from occurring again. Yet in truth, it was the massive spending and production spurred by World War II that finally brought the economic crisis to an end.
Cultural Influences

A developing mass culture and ideas that challenged traditional thought provided fodder for writers of the time.

4 New Directions

**MASS CULTURE** The 1920s was the first decade to be significantly shaped by mass media. New goods—from cars to toasters to beauty products—were flooding the market, and businesses relied on advertising to sell them. Thanks to advertising, items people had formerly considered luxuries were now deemed necessities. Mass media quickly became the ultimate source for this manufacturing of desire.

Mass production quickly and efficiently produced Americans' newfound necessities, but efficiency came with a price. Henry Ford perfected the assembly-line system, but its repetitiveness and monotony reduced workers to nameless, faceless cogs in the production process. And its products, efficiently mass-produced, led to the homogenization of American culture. **Sinclair Lewis** and many other significant writers of the day were alienated by the new values and lifestyles of their peers and soon began to criticize what they saw as Americans' conformity and materialism.

**NEW IDEAS** The writers of this period were also influenced by exciting new ideas that were challenging Americans' traditional views. A literary technique called **stream of consciousness** developed from the psychoanalytic theories of **Sigmund Freud**, who proposed that unconscious forces drive human beings and that the key to understanding behavior lay in this deeper realm of the mind. **Karl Marx's** socioeconomic theories—that history is a constant struggle between classes, for example—found their way into some of the literature of the day, mainly that of Depression-era writers. And **Albert Einstein's** theory that everything is relative, that there are no absolutes, offered writers a fresh new way of looking at the world.

**A Voice from the Times**

It's the fellow with four to ten thousand a year . . . and an automobile and a nice little family in a bungalow . . . that makes the wheels of progress go round! That's the type of fellow that's ruling America today!]

—Sinclair Lewis
from *Babbitt*
Modern Literature and the Harlem Renaissance

The writers of this period, working in a variety of genres and focusing on discrete themes, were markedly influenced by the events and culture of the day. Many responded by embracing all things new, while others celebrated their heritage.

The New Poetry

At the beginning of the century, rapid industrialization and urbanization caused many Americans to feel that the social order governing their lives was crumbling. Poets of the day began to explore in their work the impact of rapid change and uncertainty on the individual.

Edgar Lee Masters, in his famous collection *Spoon River Anthology*, used free verse to probe the discontent beneath the apparent stability of small-town life in the United States. *Spoon River Anthology* found a wide audience, in part because it voiced concerns shared by many Americans about the transformation from a rural to an industrialized society. Like Masters, Edwin Arlington Robinson also exposed the tensions underlying small-town life. His poems draw psychological portraits of characters isolated in the midst of American society. In portraying their isolation, Robinson was a forerunner of the modernist movement. These poets charted new territory by challenging conventional attitudes.

Others, such as Carl Sandburg, Robert Frost, and Edna St. Vincent Millay, seemed to be more connected to earlier traditions that focused on nature and common people. Yet they, too, revealed an awareness of the changes sweeping the American landscape. For this reason, Millay, Sandburg, and Frost can be called transitional poets, those who connect past traditions with modern thought.

MODERNISM Other poets of this period belong to the literary movement called modernism (see page 934). Modernism arose as a direct response to the social and intellectual forces shaping the 20th century. Modernist writers, many of whom were expatriates living in Europe, responded to the loss of idealism they felt in the wake of World War I. Living abroad, they experienced both the immediate and the long-term effects of World War I more acutely than did Americans at home. Most modernists also saw mass society as a threat to the individual, especially the artist. They felt that the standardization of culture resulted in alienation—a theme they captured in their work.

Experimentation was a distinguishing characteristic of these writers. “Make it new,” extolled Ezra Pound as he urged fellow poets to abandon the artifice of past forms and search for their individual voices. Harriet Monroe, editor of *Poetry* magazine, wrote that the new poetry “has set before itself an ideal of absolute simplicity and sincerity—an ideal which implies an individual, unsterotyped diction; and an individual, unsterotyped rhythm.” The lack of
“stereotypes,” however, made any recognizable movement hard to sustain: as soon as a style became accepted, it also became a new standard against which to rebel. The result was that modernist poetry as a body of work is as fragmented as many of its individual poems.

**Imagism** Many of the so-called new poets did, however, share the belief that poetry is most profoundly expressed through the “rendering of concrete objects.” Ezra Pound called this kind of poetry **imagism** because it sought to re-create an image—not comment on it, not interpret it, but just present it. Pound became the center of a circle of poets, including H. D. (Hilda Doolittle) and Amy Lowell, who cast off the sentimentality, formal structures, and rhyme schemes of their predecessors and exploded into **free verse** (poetry without a predictable rhyme or metric scheme). Ezra Pound was especially taken with the poetry of T. S. Eliot, whose *The Waste Land* is considered one of the most representative and influential of modernist poems.

**Objectivism** One modernist poet, William Carlos Williams, however, vehemently disliked *The Waste Land* for its intellectualism and its references to classical literature. In response to Eliot’s complex ideas and academic references, Williams famously stated that there are “no ideas but in things.” Williams became the center of a new movement in modernist poetry called **objectivism**, in which poets let the objects they rendered speak for themselves. These poets invited readers to experience the homely simplicity of an object for no other reason than to understand its “this-ness.”

The modernist movement had an enormous impact on later poets. Many poets today prefer to communicate through images rather than direct statements. They believe in economy of words and continue to experiment with free verse. Poetry had been altered irrevocably.

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**A Voice from the Times**

so much depends upon
a red wheel barrow
 glazed with rain water
beside the white chickens.

—William Carlos Williams

“The Red Wheelbarrow”

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Sculpture inspired by William Carlos Williams’s poem

*The Red Wheelbarrow* (1922),
Frank Jensen. © Frank Jensen.
The Modern Short Story

Poetry was not the only form popular during this period. In fact, the period from 1890 to 1930 has been called “the Age of the Short Story” in American literature. The great popularity of the short story has often been attributed to the American temperament. Americans living in the first half of the 20th century were too impatient and too much in a hurry to read longer works. They wanted “fast” literature, just as Americans today want fast food.

Other factors contributed to the popularity of the short story as well. New methods of advertising had brought about a boom in magazine publication. As the number of magazines grew, so did the demand for short stories. In turn, magazines paid their writers handsome fees. At one point, F. Scott Fitzgerald was receiving as much as $4,000 for a single story. William Faulkner, who complained that writing short stories interfered with his more serious, longer works, earned more from the sale of four short stories to the Saturday Evening Post than he did from his first four novels.

THEMES PULLED FROM LIFE The upheavals of this period in American history provided rich fodder for short story writers. World War I turned many Americans’ idealism into uncertainty. Civilization as people had known it was being destroyed, and writers sought to capture in their work the resulting alienation and confusion. Indeed, World War I shook the ideological foundations of some young American writers so profoundly that Gertrude Stein, an American writer living in Paris, called them “the lost generation.”

These alienated writers broke with the traditions of the past, turning to new methods and stylistic devices to carry their themes. Ernest Hemingway and other writers composed short, fragmentary stories without traditional beginnings or endings. They left out a narrative voice, leaving readers alone to figure out what might be going on or what a character might be feeling. “I always try to write on the principle of the iceberg,” Hemingway said. “There is seven-eighths of it under water for every part that shows.”

The boom years of the Roaring Twenties inspired its own literature. Writers such as F. Scott Fitzgerald revealed the negative side of the period’s gaiety and freedom by portraying wealthy and attractive people leading empty lives in their gilded surroundings. Writer John Steinbeck is most closely identified with the bust years of the Great Depression. Declaring that a writer’s duty is to “set down his time as nearly as he can understand it,” Steinbeck managed to tell, perhaps better than anyone else, the stories of ordinary people caught up
in the Great Depression and lost from the devastation of the Dust Bowl.

Steinbeck, *Eudora Welty*, and many other writers of the time were beneficiaries of one of President Roosevelt's New Deal programs, the Works Progress Administration (WPA). The WPA was set up to create as many jobs as possible, as quickly as possible, including work for the nation's artists and writers. As the head of the WPA put it, "They've got to eat just like other people." Eudora Welty traveled around Mississippi for the WPA, writing articles about various projects under way in the state. She later said that these travels introduced her to the very different ways in which people lived, inspiring her later writing.

**7 The Harlem Renaissance**

Beginning in 1916 and continuing throughout the 1920s, in what came to be known as the Great Migration, millions of black farmers and sharecroppers moved to the urban North in search of opportunity and freedom from oppression and racial hostility. Thousands of these migrants settled in Harlem, a New York City neighborhood that quickly became the cultural center of African-American life.

Soon, the very air in Harlem seemed charged with creativity as black men and women drew on their own cultural resources—their folk traditions as well as a new urban awareness—to produce unique forms of expression. Harlem attracted worldly and race-conscious African Americans who nurtured each other's artistic, musical, and literary talents and created a flowering of African-American arts known as the Harlem Renaissance.

**A LITERARY MOVEMENT** The event that unofficially kicked off the Harlem Renaissance as a literary movement was a dinner given on March 21, 1924. Some of the nation's most celebrated writers and thinkers, black and white, gathered at New York City's Civic Club. The sponsors of the dinner—an older generation of African-American intellectuals that included *W. E. B. Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson,* and *Charles S. Johnson*—had begun organizations such as the National Urban League and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People to promote equality for African Americans. These organizations published journals in which the writings of a younger generation were first published. *Countee Cullen, Zora Neale Hurston,* and *Langston Hughes* were among the young writers who received recognition and sometimes cash awards for...
their work in these journals, and many were present at this “coming-out party” for the writers of the Harlem Renaissance.

These young writers considered themselves the founders of a new era in literature. They looked inward and expressed what it meant to be black in a white-dominated world. They represented what came to be called “the New Negro,” a sophisticated and well-educated African American with strong racial pride and self-awareness. In fact, connections made at that dinner led to a popular and enduring anthology of writing, published in 1925, titled *The New Negro*.

**MANY VOICES** Yet this new generation of writers did not speak with only one voice. Harvard-educated Countee Cullen, for example, used a classical style to explore the black struggle. Others cast off more formal language and styles and wrote with the pulse of jazz rhythms. “Jazz is a heartbeat,” wrote Langston Hughes, “and its heartbeat is yours.” Some, like Jamaican-born Claude McKay, were militant. McKay’s poem “If We Must Die,” written after race riots in 1919, ends with an image of African Americans “pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!” Others, such as Jean Toomer, were more interested in exploring their own identities than the concerns of a whole race. “I was inescapably myself,” he wrote. Despite their varied perspectives, however, these writers shared a deep pride in their heritage and asserted their cultural identity through their work.

The Harlem Renaissance was brought to a premature end by the economic collapse of the Great Depression. Many of the writers who had gathered in Harlem were forced to scatter and take other jobs to support themselves. Nevertheless, their work planted seeds that continue to generate important writing from the African-American perspective.

**Journalism as Literature**

In the early decades of the 20th century, journalism came into its own as an influential part of the literary scene (see page 1092). The sensationalism and reckless misinterpretation of facts that had characterized journalism in the last decades of the 19th century were being replaced by an interest in stylistic quality and the recognition that there was more to news than scandal. Many of the writers who were to become major figures in American literature learned their craft—and developed some of their most compelling subjects—writing for newspapers or magazines.

**REPORTING THE ERA** Fresh out of high school in 1917, Ernest Hemingway worked as a reporter for the *Kansas City Star*. The newspaper’s strict rules of
style helped him develop the clear, provocative prose that characterizes his work: “Use short sentences. Use short first paragraphs. Use vigorous English. Be positive, not negative.” Hemingway was also a war correspondent who reported on the Spanish Civil War, and he was the first Allied journalist to enter Paris on August 25, 1944—the day it was liberated from Nazi control.

Some other writers who became well-known for their fiction produced fine journalism as well. Katherine Anne Porter, for example, worked for several newspapers and magazines. On assignment in 1920, she traveled to Mexico and arrived in the middle of a revolution. Her observations of this conflict later became the subject of several short stories in a collection called *Flowering Judas* (1930), which launched her literary career. John Steinbeck turned his hand to journalism as well, reporting in 1936 for the *San Francisco News* about the plight of California’s migrant farm workers and working in 1943 as a war correspondent for the *New York Herald Tribune*.

**MAGAZINES ON THE RISE** In the first decades of the 20th century, the popular magazine came into its own as new magazines were created to satisfy every taste and interest. The *New Yorker*, which first appeared in 1925, was founded by one-time newspaperman Harold Ross. To staff his new magazine, Ross sought writers with newspaper experience, writers who could grind out “the gleams and sparkles of humor and satire from the grist of human nature and the news of the world.” Among them were E. B. White, James Thurber, and Dorothy Parker, who went on to write poetry, short stories, and novels. Yet these writers’ reputations as witty, satiric observers of contemporary society were built on the essays, commentary, and book and theater reviews (and in the case of Thurber, cartoons too) that they contributed to the *New Yorker*.

Like poetry and short stories, literary journalism continues to be popular. Today’s writers can thank the innovators of the modernist movement, America’s giants of the short story form, the groundbreaking writers of the Harlem Renaissance, and the literary journalists of this earlier era for many of the themes, styles, and forms currently in use.

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*A Voice from the Times*

This is not a novel to be tossed aside lightly. It should be thrown with great force.

—Dorothy Parker
from a literary review
Connecting Literature, History, and Culture

The literature and culture of the United States during this period reflect developments occurring elsewhere in the world. Use the timeline and the questions on the next page to find connections.

**AMERICAN LITERARY MILESTONES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1913</td>
<td>Ezra Pound forms a group of imagist poets in London.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1915</td>
<td>Edgar Lee Masters examines small-town life in <em>Spoon River Anthology</em>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1916</td>
<td>Carl Sandburg publishes <em>Chicago Poems</em>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1919</td>
<td>Claude McKay publishes his militant &quot;If We Must Die.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>Edith Wharton's <em>The Age of Innocence</em> is published.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1924</td>
<td>Robert Frost wins the first of his four Pulitzer Prizes.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>The National Urban League is founded.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1912</td>
<td>The <em>Titanic</em> sinks, killing more than 1,500 people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1913</td>
<td>The Armory Show in New York City introduces European modernist paintings and sculpture to shocked Americans.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1916</td>
<td>Jeannette Rankin of Montana becomes the first woman elected to the U.S. House of Representatives.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1917</td>
<td>The United States enters World War I.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>The 18th Amendment ushers in the era of Prohibition, and the 19th Amendment assures women of the right to vote.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>Albert Einstein presents a lecture in New York City about his theory of relativity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1924</td>
<td>Native Americans win full citizenship.</td>
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**WORLD CULTURE AND EVENTS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>Marie Curie wins the Nobel Prize in chemistry.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1914</td>
<td>World War I begins with the assassination of Archduke Francis Ferdinand of Austria.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1915</td>
<td>The short story &quot;Rashomon&quot; by Japanese modernist writer Akutagawa Ryunosuke is published.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1918</td>
<td>A flu pandemic kills more than 20 million people worldwide.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1919</td>
<td>The Treaty of Versailles spells out the peace terms for the end of World War I.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1922</td>
<td>James Joyce publishes his masterpiece, <em>Ulysses</em>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1923</td>
<td>Sigmund Freud publishes <em>The Ego and the Id</em>, examining the causes of human behavior.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**MAKING CONNECTIONS**

- Why was the year 1913 an important one for poetry and art?
- Violence stirred in the years between 1910 and 1940. Give an example from each of the three main sections of the timeline that support this observation.
- Name three women of this period who were gaining recognition or breaking barriers in literature, politics, and science.

### TIMELINE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1925</th>
<th>1930</th>
<th>1935</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1925</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F. Scott Fitzgerald's <em>The Great Gatsby</em> explores the American dream.</td>
<td><em>Flowering Judas</em> by Katherine Anne Porter is published.</td>
<td>Margaret Mitchell publishes <em>Gone with the Wind</em>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ernest Hemingway's novel <em>The Sun Also Rises</em> chronicles expatriates after WWI.</td>
<td><em>Pearl S. Buck</em> wins a Pulitzer Prize for <em>The Good Earth</em>.</td>
<td><em>Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God</em> is published.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William Faulkner's <em>The Sound and the Fury</em> experiments with stream of consciousness and multiple viewpoints.</td>
<td><em>William Faulkner's A Green Bough</em> is published.</td>
<td>Richard Wright's <em>Native Son</em> is published.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1927</strong></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charles Lindbergh makes his historic solo nonstop flight from New York to Paris; the first talking movie, <em>The Jazz Singer</em>, stars Al Jolson.</td>
<td><em>The Empire State building is completed.</em></td>
<td><em>The Fair Labor Standards Act sets a minimum wage and limits the workweek to 40 hours.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Wall Street stock market crashes and the Great Depression begins.</td>
<td><em>Franklin Delano Roosevelt is elected president for the first of his four terms.</em></td>
<td>*Judy Garland stars in <em>The Wizard of Oz.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1925</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1930</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Richard Wright's Native Son</em> is published.</td>
<td><em>Adolf Hitler takes control of Germany.</em></td>
<td><em>World War II begins with the German invasion of Poland.</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
BACKGROUND  "What happens to a dream deferred? / Does it dry up / like a raisin in the sun?" These lines from Langston Hughes's poem "Harlem" provided Lorraine Hansberry (1930–1965) with her title for *A Raisin in the Sun*, the story of the Youngers, an African-American family whose long-cherished dreams are almost realized when Mama, the family's matriarch, comes into some money. But Mama's plans to buy a house in a white neighborhood nearly destroy the family. Hansberry had difficulty finding backers to fund her play. With its all-black cast and racial themes, *A Raisin in the Sun* was very daring for its time. But once it finally opened, it received the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for the best American play of 1959. Hansberry was the youngest person and the first African American to win the award.

*The New York Times* called *A Raisin in the Sun* the play that "changed American theater forever." It inspired a generation of young black writers and actors and brought a whole new audience to the theater. A glimpse into the private lives of African Americans was also a revelation for Broadway's white audiences. As Hansberry once observed, "The intimacy of knowledge which the Negro may culturally have of white Americans does not exist in the reverse."

LITERARY ANALYSIS  With the excerpt from *Death of a Salesman* (pages 1166–1167), you studied dialogue for conflicting views of the world. With the scene from *A Raisin in the Sun*, you will encounter a single character who voices one of Hansberry's themes. While writers of fiction can use the narrator to convey a message, playwrights rely exclusively on action and dialogue to express themes about humanity. Readers of drama—or members of a staged performance—will discover complex and fascinating ideas if they listen attentively and make subtle inferences about the characters, their actions, and their voices.

WRITE  As you read this dialogue, in which a mother discusses her son with her daughter, look for conflicting ideas about love for and duty to family members. Which character has a stronger voice here, Mama or Beneatha? Write a paragraph on the dominant character and the theme she expresses.
Willy (angrily). Business is definitely business, but just listen for a minute. You don’t understand this. When I was a boy—eighteen, nineteen—I was already on the road. And there was a question in my mind as to whether selling had a future for me. Because in those days I had a yearning to go to Alaska. See, there were three gold strikes in one month in Alaska, and I felt like going out. Just for the ride, you might say.

Howard (barely interested). Don’t say.

Willy. Oh, yeah, my father lived many years in Alaska. He was an adventurous man. We’ve got quite a little streak of self-reliance in our family. I thought I’d go out with my older brother and try to locate him, and maybe settle in the North with the old man. And I was almost decided to go, when I met a salesman in the Parker House. His name was Dave Singleman. And he was eighty-four years old, and he’d drummed merchandise in thirty-one states. And old Dave, he’d go up to his room, y’understand, put on his green velvet slippers—I’ll never forget—and pick up his phone and call the buyers, and without ever leaving his room, at the age of eighty-four, he made his living. And when I saw that, I realized that selling was the greatest career a man could want. ‘Cause what could be more satisfying than to be able to go, at the age of eighty-four, into twenty or thirty different cities, and pick up a phone, and be remembered and loved and helped by so many different people?

Do you know? when he died—and by the way he died the death of a salesman, in his green velvet slippers in the smoker of the New York, New Haven and Hartford, going into Boston—when he died, hundreds of salesmen and buyers were at his funeral. Things were sad on a lotta trains for months after that. (He stands up. Howard has not looked at him.) In those days there was personality in it, Howard. There was respect, and comradeship, and gratitude in it. Today, it’s all cut and dried, and there’s no chance for bringing friendship to bear—or personality. You see what I mean? They don’t know me any more.

Howard (moving away, to the right). That’s just the thing, Willy.

Willy. If I had forty dollars a week—that’s all I’d need. Forty dollars, Howard.

Howard. Kid, I can’t take blood from a stone, I—

Willy (desperation is on him now). Howard, the year Al Smith was nominated, your father came to me and—

Howard (starting to go off). I’ve got to see some people, kid.

Willy (stopping him). I’m talking about your father! There were promises made across this desk! You mustn’t tell me you’ve got people to see—I put thirty-four years into this firm, Howard, and now I can’t pay my insurance! You can’t eat the orange and throw the peel away—a man is not a piece of fruit!
Beneatha. That is not a man. That is nothing but a toothless rat.

Mama. Yes—death done come in this here house. (She is nodding, slowly, reflectively.) Done come walking in my house on the lips of my children. You what supposed to be my beginning again. You—what supposed to be my harvest. (to Beneatha) You—you mourning your brother?

Beneatha. He's no brother of mine.

Mama. What you say?

Beneatha. I said that that individual in that room is no brother of mine.

Mama. That's what I thought you said. You feeling like you better than he is today?

(Beneatha does not answer.) Yes? What you tell him a minute ago? That he wasn't a man? Yes? You give him up for me? You done wrote his epitaph too—like the rest of the world? Well, who give you the privilege?

Beneatha. Be on my side for once! You saw what he just did, Mama! You saw him—down on his knees. Wasn't it you who taught me to despise any man who would do that? Do what he's going to do?

Mama. Yes—I taught you that. Me and your daddy. But I thought I taught you something else too . . . I thought I taught you to love him.

Beneatha. Love him? There is nothing left to love.

Mama. There is always something left to love. And if you ain't learned that, you ain't learned nothing. (looking at her) Have you cried for that boy today? I don't mean for yourself and for the family 'cause we lost the money. I mean for him: what he been through and what it done to him. Child, when do you think is the time to love somebody the most? When they done good and made things easy for everybody? Well then, you ain't through learning—because that ain't the time at all. It's when he's at his lowest and can't believe in himself 'cause the world done whipped him so! When you starts measuring somebody, measure him right, child, measure him right. Make sure you done taken into account what hills and valleys he come through before he got to wherever he is.