American writers of the 1920s and 1930s had the arduous task of making sense out of the complex economic, technological, and social transformation of American society during the first three decades of the twentieth century. Through internal and external migration, developments in locomotive and telecommunication, efficiency in machinery, mass production, the automobile and industry, the rise of corporations, urbanization, the rise of advertising, the rise of the stock market, and the rise of a business civilization, with confidence in its new imperial power, the United States emerged as a new modern society. The era is known as the age of conformity, representing itself as modern, rational, middle class, Christian, urban, and industrial. Puritan and Victorian values comprised the norm at a time when this modern American society was producing values such as extreme individualism, consumerism, competition, materialism, and spiritual vacuousness. These writers’ greatest fear was that this consumer, mechanical society would rob them and others of their spirit, feelings, passion, curiosity, imagination, and individuality. Their task was to create models in literature that would save them and humanity.

The United States’ growth during the first three decades of the twentieth century into an economic superpower entailed not only industrial and technological growth, but also massive multiracial, multiethnic, and multi-religious immigration from Ireland, Eastern and Southern Europe, the Caribbean, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Mexico. In addition, there were the rise of the labor and women’s movements; the emergence of urban working- and middle-class blacks, who migrated from the rural South; and the successfully legal relocation of American Indians to reservations and the attempt to violently assimilate their youth into the United States through government-run schools. This was a time of dislocation, homelessness, fragmentation, and transformation—the essence of modernity—in America. To make sense out of this modern American society and to offer salvation for humanity, American writers turned to theoretical, philosophical, psychological and religious systems and paradigms such as pre-Christian religions, theosophy, African American folk culture and music, Freudian psychoanalysis, socialism, and Eastern religions as ways to escape but not completely leave Puritanism, the mechanical age, conformism, and the business civilization.

This newly multi-racial, multi-ethnic, multi-classed, imperial, industrial and technological (urban) modern American society created the context for different American writers from different backgrounds and perspectives to re-conceptualize the United States. It was a wonderfully pregnant moment—the 1920s and 1930s—in American literature: diverse American writers who were mostly born and raised in a much different (agrarian) United States in the early 1890s, with values of industry, thrift, regularity, and temperance. They struggled to define who they were and what it meant to be human in the changing 1920s and 1930s America as they moved to name and claim
this new modern American society. In the process, they were able to put their pen on the pulse and heartbeat of America and to establish in their fiction new emergent, virtual and alternative subjects and new modernities that we are still dealing with today.

The reading will be taken from Sinclair Lewis (Babbitt), Ernest Hemingway (The Sun Also Rises), John Dos Passos (The Big Money), Edith Wharton (The Age of Innocence), Theodore Dreiser (Sister Carrie), Agnes Smedley (Daughter of Earth), Djuna Barnes (Nightwood), Nathanael West (The Day of the Locust/Miss Lonelyheart), F. Scott Fitzgerald (The Great Gatsby), Richard Wright (Native Son), Zora Neale Hurston (Their Eyes Were Watching God), Jack London (The Iron Heel), Henry Miller (Tropic of Cancer), Younghill Kang (East Goes West), D’Arcy McNickle (The Surrounded), John Steinbeck (Grapes of Wrath), Willa Cather (A Lost Lady), and William Faulkner (Absalom, Absalom!). Requirements: a twenty-minutes presentation, a short paper, and a long seminar paper.