

## INTRODUCTION

### THE ENVIRONMENT OF FICTION

Why are so few novels remembered while so many thousands are forgotten? Is our literary history incomplete without accounting for these books? These questions, and others like them, have stimulated this study of “better fiction”—novels that were better than formula fiction but not as good as high art. In their time, these novels were within educated readers’ reference and memory, but over the years they have passed out of sight. Although these novels frequently won prizes and were often greeted respectfully, even eagerly, in the review columns of important magazines and newspaper supplements, they go unreclected and unread not because their authors suffered from gender, racial, or political prejudice. On the contrary: because they occupied the very center of the literary landscape, these middle-class realistic novels—and not genre writing like Westerns, romances, or mysteries—constituted the merely ordinary, that is, the fiction against which academic tastemakers later needed to contradistinguish the best. While the unfamiliarity or remoteness of more complex literature or more explicitly ideological fiction frequently necessitates sustained acts of critical preservation so they might be appreciated, the novels I am writing about issue no such challenge. Instead, they comprise the widely read, easily comprehensible fiction that Americans chose for their edification and literary entertainment. These novels mean to please and instruct middle-class America in all its diversity of social marking, economic position, political standing. Strongly pedagogical, these novels often meant to shape public awareness of cultural values as well as individual pursuits, and how they came together.

In presenting this history of modern American realism in its ascendant years, the middle decades of the twentieth century, I am mindful that perhaps no other period of U.S. literary history has been so thoroughly analyzed, in its time or since. Yet this history, although written by so many hands, with so many different missions, has been left significantly incomplete, largely as a result of a critical bias against middle-class readers and their so-called middlebrow taste. Critics and scholars, unlike reviewers, have for a long time understood their job as creating hierarchies of literary achievement, ideologies of taste. Essential as that errand has been, the unfortunate by-product of this zeal to identify a few works by a few writers (who have from time to time been replaced by a few other preferred writers) is the neglect of a vast resource; in turn, that oversight keeps us from fully understanding how cultural values are made, circulated, and recalculated. Taken together, these novels may be said to represent the kind of engaged literary experience that so many readers during the '20s, '30s, '40s, and '50s shared, the quotidian novels that inevitably clued readers to the ways their fellow citizens were thinking, believing, and acting. Arguably, these bourgeois novels were the literary forms of print culture through which Americans were most likely to enter into and perhaps to participate in the public life of the century's middle decades. In a way that I think is underestimated, such books perform the cultural work of helping to shape the public sphere in modern America.<sup>1</sup>

Because there are so many of these books, the first need is to recover them and ascertain their reception. So I will be surveying novels that were scarcely brilliant artistic achievements or dazzling commercial successes, although several of the novels I discuss were both critically recognized and sold by the tens, even hundreds of thousands. Most, however, sold much more moderately; published by large commercial presses—mostly in New York—they were issued in print runs of 1,500, 2,000, or 3,000. They were often good without being great, interesting without being indispensable, accomplished without being profound. Yet why should they disappear when we read so many books from other periods no more fully realized or more vital to our understanding of the nation's literary history and the drama of its cultural production? A great many of the books in my purview fell into disregard, while a few works by a few writers that we do honor—some would say fetishize—might be remembered. The fact is, readers will encounter here a few more or less familiar names, like James Gould Cozzens and John Marquand, but many, I suspect, will be surprised, as I was, to find so many

names that they might confess never to have heard before or about whom they have nothing much to say. Of course, these authors were most frequently white and Christian, but some were not, and a small but substantive part of my project has been to find novelists of the middle decades who might be known to a few specialists in race and ethnic literature but who once addressed a wider reading public and whose purchase on that audience's attention has now been obscured. Whatever these novelists' identities, their patron saint was William Dean Howells, not Henry James; Edith Wharton, not Djuna Barnes; Anthony Trollope or John Galsworthy, not Joseph Conrad or James Joyce.

We sometimes see these novels in used bookstores when, looking for something else, we come across titles that give us pause. Some are by authors who may be dimly recalled from scanning shelves, years ago, belonging to an educated relative or family friend who was a member of one of the better book clubs or organizations, like the American Association of University Women. The novels are also the ones that local as well as university libraries routinely try to recycle; literally, they occupy the bargain basement of literary history and can often be had at a dollar a dozen, though once they were estimable enough to be reviewed in prestigious venues.

Although scholars have successfully set about reclaiming authors who have been neglected because of social or race prejudice, these writers are seldom among them. Such projects can do only so much to satisfy the need for reordering and reinterpreting historical contexts, nor is it their ambition to study the mainstream. No less an endeavor of recovery than the *Oxford Companion to Women's Writing in the United States*, whose daunting charge was to create a first-of-its-kind reference book on this voluminous subject, consistently omits middle-class authors, including no fewer than three of the six American women who were Pulitzer Prize novelists of the 1930s. The editors do produce entries on Pearl Buck, Margaret Mitchell, and Marjorie Rawlings, but they miss Margaret Barnes, Caroline Miller, and Josephine Johnson. Such authors are left out because nothing in the ideology of canon revision necessitates extending the categories by which they could *not* be omitted. Barnes, Miller, and Johnson, among dozens of other previously esteemed women authors, are neglected because they appealed primarily to readers of middle-class taste, an identity premise near the bottom of most revisionist agendas, and were unredeemed by great popularity. In contrast to authors like Edna Ferber or Fannie Hurst, who had the saving grace of

reaching millions, some of the female novelists whose names surface occasionally in this study—like Ruth Suckow, Helen Hull, Josephine Lawrence, Martha Ostenso, Anne Parrish, Janet Fairbank, and Margaret Halsey—sold well enough and once in awhile even handsomely. They were reviewed widely, praised proportionately, and read loyally. As successful as the *Oxford Companion* is in so many other respects, the recovery of this legion of middle-class women writers, and male authors too, still needs further efforts to resituate them in critical memory.<sup>2</sup>

I stress that these books go missing as a class and as a genre, not as a handful of individual titles whose neglect is worrisome. Since my study does not include the multitude of formula fiction, the books I describe were not always the ones that *everyone* was talking about, but in the world before television, they were a valuable means of circulating not only cultural capital, but also social awareness, if only by providing a few evenings' interesting instruction about the life of the middle class and the state of society. Even to the extent that some of these books were simply holiday or commuter-train reading or weekend or evening-at-home novels, they represent a rudimentary vision of some relative cohesiveness of American life, a shareable set of values and questions about the world in which middle-class Americans live. Rather than get lost in them, readers found themselves through them. These readers were attracted to this literature, I suggest, for its potential, not for escape, but for re-creation—the opportunity for refreshing themselves and their understanding of society, their civic identities as readers. Often, this realist fiction provokes as vigorous an imaginative confrontation with public issues as citizen-readers are likely to find anywhere else in the culture. To this end, such novels are social objects; reading them signified a citizen's interest in the general life going on outside of or shaping the private sphere. Countless copies were given as birthday and Christmas gifts—enjoyable yet serious, though not necessarily weighty tokens of the interest in the world that friends and family inhabit. In such gift giving is coiled a tacit social imperative—read and ye shall understand; taken as a group, these books create a whole storehouse of evidence for determining the history of American middle-class taste and cultural anxieties.

I go so far as to say that their study, from their rise by 1920 and their temporary decline by 1960, discloses a new reserve of modern American fiction: an archive of dozens, perhaps hundreds of titles—books by men and women—that readers might still enjoy as conduits to their history and that

scholars might consult in order to perceive ever more acutely the dynamics through which the mainstream secures some values, masks some, disowns still others, how the mainstream assimilates oppositional threats or reimagines its purposes. Rather than make a false claim for these books' privileged place, I wish to recalibrate their interest, especially their contribution to the cultural politics of their era, an interest that was often quite topical and explicit, since they centrally treat issues such as livelihood, intimacy, and marriage as a matter of course, but also history, race, gender, homosexuality, region, religion, law, business, labor, ethnicity, politics, imperialism, mental illness, juvenile delinquency, suburbia, and alcoholism, among dozens of other concerns. These novels' pedagogy was rarely profound, but it was immediate insofar as they were mostly about the challenges that middle-class Americans face—in their time and place or throughout U.S. history.

The neglect of these books' appeal and the misapprehensions about their vitality may also suggest something about the changing role of fiction in twentieth-century American culture, including the gloomy way that academic criticism has inadvertently contributed to the attenuation of the status of literature in the public sphere. Literary scholars will read virtually any other kind of fiction before they read works of middle-class realism. Modernist and New Critical preoccupations favored difficult authors, thus severing college readers from each generation's contemporary fiction on the dubious grounds that they were already equipped to read such presumably unfit or unchallenging works anyway. Even now, in an academic culture reputedly unfettered by modernist precepts about the relation between author and audience or dislocations of time and space or fractured allusions, the teaching of contemporary fiction seldom embraces middle-class experience; indeed, the teaching of contemporary American fiction is still likely to equate the contemporary with the postmodern or experimental writing.

The novels in my purview were readily accessible and were covered by daily newspapers, public opinion magazines, and Sunday supplements. Acknowledged for its artistic expression or cultural wisdom, such writing never needed an expert class of critics to interpret it or scholars to list its seven types of ambiguity. In a basic sense, this fiction never needed academic endorsement to gain its audience, nor did its level of difficulty ever elicit a technical vocabulary to enhance its appreciation—a condition replicated in the way publishers now include book club questions at the back of some contemporary novels. Unlike modernist writing, such fiction meant to be

very nearly transparent; its aim was to chronicle and investigate the American culture with which it was contemporary, the world that was simultaneously disappearing and reinventing itself afresh before readers' eyes.

If history is written by the victors, so too is literary history. Throughout this study, I explain how various circumstances influence how this record has been kept and how the books we do remember participate in the literary environment in ways other than rebellion against it. A closer examination of that environment—what critics and reviewers said about books, what other novels were under discussion, what kinds of nonfiction addressed similar ideas—helps to demonstrate how treacherous is the critical ground on which we rest so much confidence and how quickly confounded is our defense of why we remember the books we do.

Although the contingencies of writing literary history have something to do with the reason that these books have been eclipsed over the years, wooden plots or conventional characters are also sometimes to blame. Some books lauded in their time really do not carry well over the generations. My general point, however, is that we really do not know these books as a subgenre well enough to dismiss or ignore them as casually as so many literary historians typically do. And we are often oblivious to them as the result of the antibourgeois prejudice permeating literary academe for decades. That prejudice especially circulated in the twentieth century's middle decades, when the great question for many critics was to determine the revolutionary potential of modern culture, critics who believed it was necessary to choose one radical position or another to save democracy, if democracy could be saved. From such a perspective, mainstream fiction represents the middle-class vision of American life during the years that the middle class came to occupy its central role as cultural arbiter. While several authors embraced radical politics for a time, the dominant social point of view was bourgeois and the political framework usually liberal—in the old, humane sense of the word. With relative degrees of enlightenment, these novelists wrote about all peoples of America—the position of minorities, including homosexuals, as well as the treatment of Native Americans. Scholars of the last twenty years or more often have observed that such groups are sadly underpopulated in so much of U.S. literary history; largely absent in canonical American literature these groups may be, but their presence throughout the broad expanse of twentieth-century realism is readily demonstrated.

Readers may even be startled to learn how much of this fiction is actually *about* the relation between majority and minority cultures.

Several books that I discuss were selections of the Book-of-the-Month Club or the Literary Guild, among other organizations, recognition that once would have probably guaranteed their debased status among critics anxious about the incursions made against elite culture by such institutions. In fact, this fiction is frequently described as “middlebrow,” a term of disdain whose use I, in turn, disparage, insofar as the label lazily mystifies class-based values in the name of intellectual distinction. Actually, such “brow”-ism borrows an image that intellectuals in the early twentieth century adopted from anthropologists (who had poached it from nineteenth-century phrenologists and craniologists), who claimed that the height of the brow indicated the potential for civilization. This nomenclature, predictably enough, was also pressed into racist service in debates about immigration and cultural citizenship. Seizing on the resonance, Dwight Macdonald invoked the term for his excoriation of the “midcult”—the world of movies and books and other artistic expressions reinforcing the dull centrism of American democratic thought, typified by Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town* and Norman Rockwell’s magazine covers. Now, a half century later, with mass culture dominant everywhere, such battles seem like quaint bygones; their reliance on metaphors (not to mention out-of-date ones) seems inadequate to the cultural disputes that have replaced the ones that first yielded the term: the commitment to preserve high culture against the appropriations of the middle has outlasted its urgency. So perhaps we should just give up the word. An ever-diminishing crew of critics ferociously determined to uphold a modernist vision of culture still deprecates the “middlebrow,” but by this time, their enemy is really less the midculture’s imitations than pop culture’s globalizing supremacy.<sup>3</sup>

When I call these novels “middle class,” I mean nothing pejorative, certainly none of the modernist disdain for the bourgeoisie. Rather, I use the phrase more for its evocative power than its definitional value. First, I am describing a milieu populated largely by people who make a comfortable enough living that they have the leisure to engage in questions of interiority as well as social appearances. The resolution of their dilemmas will usually be compromises between the conflicting demands of these private and public spheres. Foremost among their private concerns is intimate life, espe-

cially courtship and marriage; foremost among their public concerns are the struggles of livelihood, though often they are also witnesses to history or participants in various political and social dramas. The resolution of these conflicts obviously tends to validate the anxieties of the characters' class identifications—who would be surprised? Doesn't any class-identified literature do the same?—though these novels often criticize the most self-satisfied, least generous understandings of the social problems they examine. Typically, the change the novels call for demands a refocusing of attention, not a radical reformation. Their limitation is in the way that these authors imagine circumstances, which tend to be literal-minded, so their realism risks being familiar, even tame. Otherwise, there would be more Dostoyevskies and George Eliots. The efforts of such fiction are not to move the rich or poor into appreciating the worries of the middle class, struggling or otherwise, nor do these novels mean smugly to reinforce the self-consciousness of middle-class life or hold up that life for universal admiration or censure. Instead, these novels situate for readers the social circumstances and psychological and moral ramifications as well as cultural, even political and historical, implications of the way larger public issues make their impact on the private life of the middle class.

When I call these novels or their readers “bourgeois,” I do not mean anything derogatory, either. I use the term with respect for its difference but without designating *petit* or *haute*, nor as differentiating the urban middle class from its suburban or rural counterpart. I sometimes draw from social historians and theorists in making these designations, since their insights often enliven my reading, but the critical study of the middle class is really a fairly new scholarly enterprise, with just a few books vaulting over the long-term problem of determining the coherence of a class about which it is said some 80 percent of Americans say they belong. Readers who insist on knowing who comprised the middle class or who hope that I will succeed where so many predecessors have failed by defining just what the term “middle class” means will be distressed, but not so much, I trust, that they will miss the chance of learning about this neglected trove of U.S. writing—the fiction written for the American middle class, by the American middle class, about the American middle class.

Instead, I am describing recreational or citizen-readers who as consumers had the means, opportunity, and inclination to keep up with hardback publishing in the '20s, '30s, and '40s, and who continued to support that litera-

ture after the paperback revolution in the late '40s and early '50s. Sometimes, the interest in this fiction can be measured in the retail sales of a book, though in general I am less interested in numbers than I am in critical approval to ensure a book's interest. (I might also have used the index of the White House Library, which since 1930 has collected works of nonfiction and fiction that major publishers have considered their best products of the decade, but even that canonization seemed too narrow, though with the White House as the repository, such books obviously enjoy a certain imprimatur of establishing or codifying national consciousness and the nation-state's literary legacy.)

These readers are middle class insofar as they are the implied audience for novels that take their experience as narratable, as stories that can be told, specified, and complicated, with a poised assurance of an expectant audience. Forty years ago, literary critics developed a formal concept of an implied reader; reading dozens and dozens of these novels, and hundreds of reviews and belletristic essays, also led me to appreciate that the general audience to whom so many of these writings were addressed was implicitly middle class, at least to the extent that the characters' problems were the selfsame anxieties of the American middle class. In part, this was a revelation: proletarian literature might be designated by its special class interests; why not these novels? At the same time, understanding that the works were intended for middle-class readers was remarkably commonplace, for, of course, who else had the social investment and leisure interest to consult the realist tradition for its representations of modern life? By invoking "middle class" as an identity more imaginary than a demographically specific entity, I also mean to preserve the looseness of the term, whose very fluidity is essential to my purpose of describing a cultural institution that so fittingly admits of so much contradiction, inconsistency, contingency, appropriative power, assimilative energy, and exclusionary force.

Calling such novels "middlebrow" distracts us from their nuances of class and supports two critical schemas antagonistic to this literature: first, it promotes criticism as an Arnoldian quest for connoisseurship, with dictatorial critics dismissing anything insufficiently highbrow. The unintentional, though by no means unwelcome, result of this hierarchalizing is, then, also to glamorize the lowbrow, as if to challenge decorum by finding in low culture redemptive—that is, pacifying or arousing—properties. The result is that high and low, but not middle, are discussably within a critic's ken.

Second, brow-ism disguises ignorance as superior taste to exempt critics and scholars from reading the stuff, as if to insulate them from the subterfuges of the mediocre and protect them from the danger of mistaking a phony as the real thing. The result is to turn the professional critic and the academic scholar into a “standardized” reader, that 1920s term for conformist ideals, someone who judges by brand names. The irony is that, far from condemning middle-class culture, a good many esteemed academic and nonacademic critics in the middle decades, unlike so many contemporary critics and scholars, actually wrote books that educated readers appreciated: novels, historical narratives, travel accounts, or meditations on the state of American life and letters.

I propose that we come to know this fiction as the twentieth-century continuation of the Howellsian vein of American fiction, a vein that generations of critics have either disparaged (for reasons I will describe) or consciously ignored, since it served neither their highbrow aspirations nor their lowbrow enthusiasms. Traditional scholars may be reluctant to do so now since it violates their good sense: if these books were really so good, they may aver, surely the news would be known by this time. (Dawn Powell’s resurrection, led by Gore Vidal, suggests that, for all we know, there might be others, though it is as a chronicler of the New York demimonde, not as a novelist of bad manners in the Ohio of her youth, that formed the basis of her new preferment.) Progressive scholars, on the other hand, often find that redressing the ideological mistakes that result from conservative orthodoxy means that they need to focus their energies on works that never did find the audience they deserve or whose audience was impugned. The fiction I have in mind, however, did have an audience, an appreciative one that just did not have any vested interest in remembering the literary history unfolding before it daily, perhaps because there would have been no reason to suppose that the interests that this literature represented would ever have been endangered. Those books, like the visions of America they represented, endlessly replaced themselves, season after publishing season, thereby giving us a cultural history of the United States in the midst of revising itself. Like the middle class itself, the America that these novels amply witness is not inert but insistently supple, always redefining its boundaries, redesigning its purposes, rearticulating its bewilderments, reaffirming its triumphs, and reenacting its worries.

Sometimes, these books were seen by their reviewers as every bit as

compelling as the ones we actually have seized on as the foundation of our twentieth-century literary heritage, like F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925). It is also interesting to learn from reading so many reviews just how often critics, by our current estimate, got their job right, how well they recognized, within their inevitable limits, what we now regard as brilliance, even for books we think today they surely would have gotten wrong, like William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) or Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). And when evaluations were split (on Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* in 1952, for example), the reasons for that division of opinion could be very telling.

Readers may complain about the amorphousness of "middle-class" writing as a category (though the label is scarcely derided as an inadequate term of derision) and yet, as a Supreme Court judge said of pornography, we know it when we see it. We also generally imagine we know, without the aid of sociologists, economists, political scientists, and cultural theorists (welcome as their efforts are), what makes the middle-class mind what it is and what it is not, though more than a few literary historians might feel apprehensive about readily claiming insight into the policies and procedures of other classes. Should middle-class professors and their mainly middle-class students be surprised to discover that the middle-class mind can translate a thousand inimical attributes into something it can accommodate, can make its vision even more comprehensive; its voice, even more resonant? While some novels merely apologize for a bourgeois point of view, this fiction, as a group, is generally more concerned with examining the kinds of perplexity and threats of discomfiture that the middle class was facing during the forty years in which it extended its cultural domain. Thus, they dramatize any everyday subject in order to criticize, expand, revise, and finally to help reclaim middle-class understanding.

Middle-class writers have been typically described as "minor," which remains a pejorative term among academic critics, though that barb has recently lost some of its sting to the extent that *minority* discourse has been politicized and valorized. Yet *minor* as a literary classification is still a trivializing term: the race and gender implications here are well known. Literary historians also want to ensure that writers are not quieted for having advocated unpopular, even subversive causes, or having voiced the complaints of the oppressed. In academe, the prejudice against the (qualitatively) minor in U.S. literature rose from the fear that virtually the entire national corpus

risked being seen, from the British and continental point of view, as minor. Out of such apprehension, only decidedly minor intellects studied minor writers, while major writers appealed, as you would suspect, to major intellects. For many Americanists, defending their field in departments governed by Anglophiles required maximizing the major and minimizing the minor.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, a whole critical apparatus was invented—the New Criticism—to prove the richness, complexity, and coherence of major texts, against the less unambiguous interests and less paradoxical achievements of the minor. New Criticism thus provided a means for sorting out which writers and works were worth studying, a function that helped to cement its postwar prestige. In the last twenty-five years, however, we see that instead of literary expertise, academic criticism is often seen as cultivating its authority through political rather than aesthetic powers of discrimination—at its least exercised, a form of advocacy. Yet criticism, as we now practice it, is supposed to show us how such ideological challenges get formulated and situated. The result is that, in the effort to promote the interests of what used to be thought of as the minor and the marginal, we unwittingly reinforce the major by upholding the power of the canon as a solidifying force. Even though revisionists may see their endeavors as egalitarian and liberatory—to serve the oppressed and to worry the privileged—we risk preserving the very antinomies we distrust: enlisting in the party of the angels, we wind up doing the devil’s work.

Although I have undertaken this study in an effort to historicize our twentieth-century literary heritage, the problem facing such revisionism is that we are not sufficiently removed from the era and know it only too well by conventional wisdom. Scholars of earlier centuries have a record, in letters and diaries, of what people read and what they made of their reading. In the twentieth century, despite the changes wrought by the telephone, we also have an extremely full account of readers’ interests—in the words of book reviewers. Those accounts of new books seldom achieve the deliberative character of literary criticism or cultural meditation; mostly, they were written by professional readers for amateur ones and were proffered as consumer reports: Will you get your money’s worth? Reviews express what educated readers look for by inquiring how closely the novel approaches art, or whether it reads like a sociological tract. Or reviews aim to inform readers whether it will gratify them to know these characters’ lives, which is to say whether it is worth their time because it will lead to some sort of sympa-

thetic enhancement or intensification. Reviews communicate to readers the human or affective aspect, though for the most part that turns out to be a middle-class standard of better conduct. At the same time, reviewers mean to instruct their readers as to the public virtue of these books: Will engagement in the plots make readers more modern, more tolerant, more perceptive citizens? So, where appropriate, reviewers also take up a novel's concern with the state of society, or the burden of history, the economic predicament, as well as political consequences.

The novels I study are seldom so finished or rich that their unpacking requires the kind of determined acts of clarification that have been the glory of literary criticism over the last sixty years. Unlike postmodern fiction, they are not so complex that theories of language, time, and space needed to be developed to understand them. Rather, this fiction *wants* to be available: the ironies and ambiguities of the contemporary history these novels play out seem patent, their contradictions readily reconciled. Nor is this history disguised to escape some cultural censor. The books are committed to their realist faith and only infrequently resort to allegory. Of course, there is a fuller, shared life embedded in these texts; that is the point—but there are far too many of them for one person to study at one time. Closely reading eight or nine of them really cannot achieve my purpose of describing the range and scope of what may amount to a new resource in the field, nor will it do simply to create a taxonomy or morphology for them so that others will glean their appeal. The deeper interest of these books, for me, can be developed precisely out of their perceived weakness: how much they are *like* other books—fiction and nonfiction—how explicitly and reliably they register meanings and values abroad in the culture.

Additionally, I hesitate to build my argument on close readings of these novels as works of social consciousness; these books are not so unapproachable that only the minute study of their problematic dynamics of representation will enable their demystification. There are a few novels that represent the range of inquiries I invoke at different junctures, but it is the whole idea of one standing for dozens or a dozen standing for hundreds that has contributed so largely to these books being forgotten. I hope to show that there remains a significant body of literature still to read, a significant body of historical criticism and scholarship still to write. My aim is to describe this repository of a more intricate, enriched understanding of mainstream American life and its formation through the last century, an understanding too

important to be left to shibboleths and slogans. Political, social, and cultural historians think nothing of writing a ceaseless procession of tomes about the same era, willing as they are to mine the evidence for fresh insight. Literary historians might do the same. Yet too often, because it is the culture so many academics know best, middle-class life is the one that is studied least.<sup>5</sup> Throughout, I name dozens of novels that I believe Americanists could and should know something about, but perhaps hundreds more can be recovered to create a truer literary historical framework for the era. It is paramount that we glean an understanding of the middle-class annals of American literary history, especially during the era when the American middle class came into prominence as the arbiter of cultural taste and social meaning. So we should exert on these literary works the same scholarly pressure we would apply to the historical artifacts of any other century. Engaging the middle class enables us to see more fully how public consciousness is formed and thus to realize our sense of the state of the nation. Reading this fiction also makes us aware of how precious this resource is, even as it grows increasingly remote.

#### MODERN AMERICAN FICTION AND THE GOOD READER

In what follows, I introduce readers more fully to my subject by studying an especially vivid moment in the voluminous history of American self-consciousness so that we may observe how the discussion of fiction stages arguments about the sort of persons we are and the kind of public we constitute. This particular hour of critical reflection also allows me to spell out even more explicitly some of the historical issues that set my study in motion. The moment comes near the end of the Great War, when “Civilization in the United States”—the title of the era’s most famous compendium of opinion on the subject—was especially open to diagnosis. While the perennial question of America’s meaning or promise was then being debated even more contentiously than usual, a polite discussion of the subject was convened during the final summer of the war, when Cambridge University assembled a group of British and U.S. Americanists for its symposium, “The America of Today.” Participants included a former secretary of the British embassy in Washington, the U.S. commercial attaché in London, and several academics, most notably George Santayana, but also Yale professor of English, Henry Seidel Canby, whose topic was “Literature in Contemporary America.”<sup>6</sup>