

Modern Times in Maine and America, 1890-1930

Session 1. Modern Times Video

The Modern Times video has been produced to help participants get quickly caught up in the history, spirit, and significance of the early 20th century. To set the historical stage, it combines original music, narration, commentary by scholars, rare moving images, still photographs never publicly seen before and interview with older Mainers who still sharply remember what life was like in the early years of the century. Beginning with a discussion of the State of Maine building at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893, the video moves on to the growth of industry and hydroelectric utilities; Maine's role in American expansionism; immigration and the decline of agriculture; urban problems and Maine's contributions to progressive reform and the growing national interest in the outdoors; the effects of World War I and the peculiar self-centeredness of the 1920s, overwhelmed with automobile, movies and radio. In short, the video is designed to give a brief but interesting overview of the intersection of Maine and American history in the period, to give that history a lively human face, and to suggest its pertinence to the lives of those watching.

Session 2. *The Jungle*, Upton Sinclair (1906)

The Jungle, a powerful journalistic novel about the Chicago stockyards at the turn of the century, is indispensable to understanding the economic, social, and human dimensions of the new industrial order and the reform consciousness it inspired. Originally serialized in a socialist weekly, the published book caused a sensation: it defined the muckraking genre; it was translated into 17 languages; it was used by Teddy Roosevelt to push through new legislation reforming the meat-packing industry. The power of the novel rests in the two unforgettable portraits it draws. The first is the nature of the industrial machine itself—here the meat-processing plants of the Chicago stock yards. The second is of the immigrant laborers who fuel that machine—a family of Lithuanians led by the young and hopeful Jurgis. With a kind of relentless and dispassionate clarity, Sinclair unfolds the working and logic of the machine: its scale, its incessance, its corruption, and its carelessness of human life. With equal clarity we see Jurgis go from an incomprehending peasant awed by the systematic “poetry” of the conveyor belt to one who is ground down, along with the women and children of his family, by its working. We see the disproportionate power of the industrialist, learn the meaning of labor unions and labor strife, and begin to see why socialism was attractive to so many in the period; we also see the inevitability of vice, the pervasiveness of political corruption, and the dangerous human compounding of the urban city. While nothing in Maine could compare with Chicago, the hard lives of immigrant workers—Franco-Americans, Italians and Poles—in the industrial operations of Lewiston and Millinocket showed many of the same tensions.

Session 3. *Herland*, Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1915)

Though Upton Sinclair called Charlotte Perkins Gilman “America’s most brilliant woman, poet and critic” she was considered by the early twentieth-century mainstream to be a radical of the worst sort: proposing the economic independence of women, neglecting her duties as wife and mother, and imagining the broadest kind of social change. As a feminist, Gilman supported the movement for women’s suffrage, but her vision, more revolutionary than progressive, saw beyond that practical goal to a world newly humanized through the interaction of women’s liberation and social reform. *Herland* is the depiction of such a world. In the Modern Times series it represents an introduction to the new social consciousness that dominated the modern period in the pre-War years. Unlike so many utopian novels, *Herland*—a fantasy about the discovery of a lost feminist civilization—is an immensely readable, delicious, even profound social satire. Three educated male explorers, carrying with them all the prejudices of their age, station, and sex, encounter a previously unknown race of women whose isolation from the rest of the world has let them to evolve, in Darwinian fashion, a unique culture and society. They have created, in fact, a scientifically advanced, asexual, non-competitive, egalitarian world—a community of mothers, sisters, and daughters inhabiting an essentially pastoral landscape. Captured by the women, impressed by their

confidence and accomplishment, the explorers reluctantly begin to face the fact that their ideas about the female, and all that touches on the female—home, work, sex, and marriage—have more to do with cultural conditioning than with nature. The explorers begin to see the possibility of a society organized on a completely rational plan—that favorite longing of the reformers—but they have already brought the women of the Herland garden the fruit of their demise: the melancholy of sexual love and the knowledge of another, more real society—troubled, irrational, and abused.

Session 4. *Babbitt*, Sinclair Lewis, (1922)

Though Sinclair Lewis's novel *Babbitt* was once a popular choice for high school English classes, it is now quite neglected. Perhaps this is because its central character, George F. Babbitt, is so richly planted in a now unfamiliar past: the twenties, America's post-war age of commerce, comfort, and excess. Writing at the time of the book's publication, H.L. Mencken thought Lewis had gotten it just right: "For the first time a wholly genuine American has got into a book. . . the cocky, bustling, enormously successful American of the big towns. . . the Master of Salesmanship, the Optimist, the 100 percent Patriot and Right Thinker." Along with this fabulous character portrait comes a cross-sectional view of middle class urban/suburban life, rendered in loving, elaborate, ironic detail. Lewis helps us understand the social meanings of boosterism, paternalism, money grubbing, class consciousness, philandering, real estate sales, advertising, cocktail parties, cigars, automobiles, and home study courses. We see the corruption of local politics, the workings of an all-pervading racism, the nasty face of tribal allegiances. We look at labor's demands from the cynical side, and watch the previous decades' passion for social reform peter out in weak-hearted fads. *Babbitt* will obviously play a pivotal role in the Modern Times series. What makes the novel even more interesting, however, is that Maine—the dream of a vacation in Maine—plays an archetypal role in Babbitt's half-awakened consciousness. Babbitt, increasingly desperate and unhappy within the constraints of his comfortable but immature life, goes to Maine hoping to be "converted to serenity." So far from the provincial capitals of the midwest, Maine yet looms as the antidote to all urban ills: unsophisticated, unpeopled and pure. Like watching a play within a play, *Babbitt* will give Maine audiences the chance to see the image of their state reflected in the nation's consciousness.

Session 5. *As The Earth Turns*, Gladys Hasty Carroll (1931)

Within six months of its publication, *As the Earth Turns* led the best seller list in every major city in the country. If the Saturday Review of Literature is any guide, this novel of Maine farm life was being read (as so often with works from Maine) as a corrective, an authentic reaffirmation of traditional rural (and racial) values in the face of America's pervasive urban malaise: "In these Maine folk. . . appear again the indubitable Yankees. . . It is good to see their ruddy features emerge through the socialist pallor of our times. They were said to be lost; now by amazing grace they are found." Read today, however, the book seems less an exercise in quasi-religious nostalgia than a clear-eyed investigation of a disappearing way of life. Beginning as a portrait of a contemporary farm family in southern Maine, the novel lets us consider the state of rural life in Maine in the late twenties. What we see is that this traditional cultural stronghold is beset by the change and uncertainties characteristic of the modern period. The family situation is complex: each parent has children by earlier marriages, some are being pulled away by the city, by college educations, by the lure of airplanes; other family members are trying, unsuccessfully, to farm, while being lured to the new commercial possibilities of the town; one desperate woman despises her husband, and drudgery of house work and raising children. Polish immigrants are settling nearby, disturbing the neighborhood and its Yankee consensus. In the center of these transformations, however, there is one powerfully serene woman, Jen, a daughter who becomes a kind of earth mother, and one man—the silent, hardworking competent father—who is the archetype of the Maine yeoman. Together they meet the test of the foreign, while conserving their relation to the land, the seasons, and the time-honored roles of men and women. Like Maine itself, the novel does ultimately champion the traditional values, but it does so with a clear-eyed tolerance and an understanding of the inevitability of change. It is a book that deserves to have a new and wider readership.