

## Passage III

**HUMANITIES:** This passage is adapted from the preface to *On Native Grounds: An Interpretation of Modern American Prose Literature* by Alfred Kazin (©1995 by Alfred Kazin).

I began *On Native Grounds* on a kitchen table in Brooklyn, 1938, and completed it in Long Island City, 1942, expecting a call from my draft board at any minute. The dates are essential to any understanding of the book, to its survival for over fifty years and its continued influence. There is no excitement for a writer like that of living in rebellious times. At least before World War II broke out, my work in progress was very much the product of and a response to the social crises of the '30s. The massive breakdown of the American economy in the depression was the greatest national crisis after the Civil War, and I lived in its very midst, tossed up and down in the stormy ocean of the times by the suffering of my unemployed working-class parents, the mass social protests all over the country, the triumph of Fascism in Germany, Italy, and Spain, and the extremism in America itself of Communist and Fascist ideologies in violent conflict.

What Walt Whitman wrote about the Civil War in "Drum-Taps" could have been said of the '30s:

Long, too long America,  
Traveling roads all even and peaceful you learn'd from joys and prosperity only,  
But now, ah now, to learn from crises of anguish, advancing, grappling with direst fate and recoiling not,  
And now to conceive and show to the world what your children enmasse really are . . .

A history of modern American prose literature begun in such a period and continued out of a sense of social crisis during the great global war against Fascism! The literary significance of this is that I believed in what essayist William Hazlitt called the "spirit of the age"—meaning that *this* age we were living in had a character all its own and could be related to other ages and periods, thus constituting a historical scene in which a period was known through its writers and its writers through their period.

Of all my books, *On Native Grounds* was the easiest to write. I felt what I have never felt since 1945—that the age was wholly with me, that I was appealing to "the spirit of the age," that the writers as characters in my book were friends and the most encouraging people in the world to write about. I was writing literary *history*, a genre long abandoned by critics and now suspect (history can no longer be characterized and summed up as confidently as it was in the '30s and early '40s by the young man who wrote this book). This means that I saw connections everywhere between history and literature. I saw connections between the writers themselves as fellow-spirits and artists relating to the pressures of American life.

My subject was the emergence of the "modern" in an American literature obviously unsettled by relentless

new forces in every sphere: social, intellectual, and religious. My perspective, so natural in the turbulent '30s, was based on a spirit of social protest I shared with almost every writer in my book.

There was nothing strange or unexpected in 1938 about my being both critical of "the system" and crazy about the country. What drew me to the serious study of American literature within a historical context was the *narrative* it suggested on every hand. America from its beginnings as "our rising empire" (George Washington) embodied a purposeful form of historical movement, unprecedented on such a continental scale, that cried out to be written as a great story. In the background of the particular story I was writing was the sense, which was everywhere at the end of the nineteenth century, of a new age. What struck me from the first was the astonishment with which American writers confronted situations as new to themselves as to the Europeans who were often reading about America for the first time.

What gave me the confidence at twenty-three to begin a book like this? The age, the insurgency of the times, but above all *On Native Grounds* represents my personal discovery of America. The first native son in my immigrant family, brought up in a Brooklyn ghetto by parents whose harshly enclosed lives never gave them a chance even to learn English, I was crazy about the America I knew only through books. And it was such an idealistic America, defined by its purest spirits, from Audubon and Jefferson to Emerson and Thoreau, to the Lincoln who had saved the Union, to the great democrats of philosophy John Dewey and William James, and to the Willa Cather, Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, and Carl Sandburg who brought home the Middle West to me as the valley of democracy and the fountainhead of hope.

21. To which facet of American life does the passage's author make the fewest direct references in the passage?
- A. Military  
B. Social  
C. Religious  
D. Literary
22. According to the passage, when he started *On Native Grounds*, the passage's author was:
- F. twenty-three and the year was 1938.  
G. in his thirties and the depression had just ended.  
H. eighteen and the year was 1938.  
J. twenty and America had just entered World War II.

23. All of the following are details the passage's author mentions about his parents EXCEPT that they:
- A. did not speak English.
  - B. were unemployed during the depression.
  - C. were proud of their son's accomplishments.
  - D. raised a family in Brooklyn, New York.
24. The poem quoted in lines 21–27 is best described as:
- F. Kazin's poem written as a portrait of America in transition in the 1930s.
  - G. Kazin's poem bemoaning the direction taken by America after the Civil War.
  - H. Whitman's poem, which Kazin uses as an example of patriotic but unpopular verse.
  - J. Whitman's poem, which Kazin presents as embodying the spirit of two different eras.
25. It can reasonably be inferred from the fourth paragraph (lines 38–51) that when he wrote *On Native Grounds*, the passage's author felt his position with regard to the times was that of:
- A. an outsider wanting a way to get involved.
  - B. a person completely in tune with the times.
  - C. a youth impatient with the times' outdated traditions.
  - D. an activist capable of perfecting society.
26. It can reasonably be inferred that when the passage's author says his perspective was *natural* (line 55), he means it was:
- F. free of the influences of academic training.
  - G. based in a respect for the environment.
  - H. a product of times characterized by insurgency.
  - J. an outcome of being raised to value literature.
27. When the passage's author mentions "the valley of democracy" (line 87), he is referring to the:
- A. Union, as preserved by Lincoln at the time of the Civil War.
  - B. New World, as described by Whitman in poetry the author read as a child.
  - C. Middle West, as portrayed by Cather, Dreiser, Anderson, and Sandburg.
  - D. United States, as perceived by the author's idealistic parents before they immigrated to New York.
28. The passage's author states that compared to writing other books, writing *On Native Grounds* was:
- F. more challenging.
  - G. more disillusioning.
  - H. less time-consuming.
  - J. less difficult.
29. The passage's author states that what drew him to the serious study of American literature within a historical context was the:
- A. narrative it suggested on every hand.
  - B. breakdown of the U.S. economy.
  - C. political power of Whitman's poetry.
  - D. powerful novels written by historians.
30. One of the discoveries the passage's author says he made when writing *On Native Grounds* was that the American writers he was examining reacted to the American experience with:
- F. profound gratitude.
  - G. genuine astonishment.
  - H. cautious approval.
  - J. utter disbelief.