In 1974, a year after Robert M. Coates's death, his friend Malcolm Cowley attempted to describe Coates's remarkable experimental style and likened the author to his father, a successful mechanical engineer who was fascinated with being an inventor: "I think of [Robert Coates] as a craftsman, an inspired mechanic working with words as his father had worked with pieces of metal, choosing and calibrating, fitting together, then grinding and polishing in the hope of achieving some ultimate invention." It seems clear that Frederick Coates's professional interests, as well as the life his family led as a result, had a strong influence on the kind of writer his son was to become.

At the time of Coates's birth in New Haven, Connecticut, on April 6, 1897, Frederick was about to open a bicycle store, the West Side Cyclery, on Congress Avenue. In an advertisement Coates promised "first-class repairing" and sought to distinguish himself from the many others by proclaiming, "Special attention paid to working up Inventions." Frederick, who was descended from a family of mechanics, gradually developed from a toolmaker to a professional designer of special machinery. Whenever he had enough money to support his family, he would devote all of his time to "developing one of his never-quite-perfect inventions." A true enthusiast, Frederick tried hard to instill some interest in machinery into his hoped-for "& Son" but was unsuccessful. From an early age Robert Coates was determined to become a writer (with poetry his first choice) and never doubted his vocation. As he wrote in his memoir: "I find it hard to recall a time when I didn't want to be a writer." Although he did not follow in his father's footsteps, Coates duplicated Frederick's career pattern: besides his formal occupations as short story writer, reporter, book reviewer, and art critic, he always sought an outlet for his most innovative creativity in his novels, which he preferred above anything else.
Because of Frederick Coates’s desire to invent, the family’s economic life was erratic to the point that the Coateses “scarcely knew where [they] were at from one day to another.” The family’s life was even more unsettled geographically. Starting in 1905 Coates’s father—“a true man of impulse, and given to wandering”—took his wife and son on a ten-year tour of the United States. The family moved so often that Malcolm Cowley felt the young Coates “grew up in more places than laid claim to Homer.” Before he had turned eighteen, the boy had lived in various gold-mining camps in Colorado; Seattle, Washington; Portland, Oregon; Cincinnati, Ohio; Springfield, Massachusetts; Buffalo, New York City, and Rochester; and “other way stops, for stays ranging from a few months up to two or three years, depending on [his father’s] mood and his commitments.”

During this unpredictable journey through the United States, the small family became a tightly knit entity with its own “private jokes and private references” and came to regard themselves as somehow different from other people: “We felt defiant. We were the traveled ones, the will-o’-the-wisps, the gypsies; they were the stay-at-homes, and if we insisted on that difference—possibly, as I think of it now, a trifle too much—that didn’t matter greatly, either; it only emphasized our own compactness.” At the same time, as Coates recalled on the first page of his memoir, “everywhere we went, I was, for a period at least, the new boy, the outsider.”

In reports of his youth, the writer always claimed that the experience had not harmed him: “I didn’t resent it particularly then and I still don’t, though I’ve been told by more psychologically minded acquaintances that the experience must have scarred me for keeps.” Despite Coates’s denials, however, his fiction is filled with feelings of loneliness and inconsequentiality, the sense of being an outsider or spectator, and the desire for contact and communication. Although such themes are by no means unique to Coates and can indeed be found in many works of the Lost Generation, the pervasiveness of them in Coates’s writings is striking, as is the emotional intensity that he frequently brought to bear on these subjects.

The pattern of restless moving that marked Robert Coates’s youth began early: before he was seven years old, the family had already moved five times, all within the city of New Haven. In 1905 the family left the East Coast for Colorado. Having given up his bicycle store in 1902, Frederick Coates decided to go west and try his luck at gold mining, leasing one of the small claims that made up the big Vindicator Mine in the Cripple Creek district. The family stayed in Cripple Creek for three years, but even during that short time they were far from stationary. To be closer to their mine, the family moved from the fairly large town of Victor to tough and shabby Independence, then moved on to Goldfield, and
finally settled down in the tiny settlement of Christmas Crossing, a “mere clump of log huts and tar-papered shanties” at an altitude of close to eleven thousand feet.

Cripple Creek, with its mining camps and spectacular natural surroundings, made quite an impression on the youngster from New Haven. Coates documented the area with great precision in *The View from Here* as well as in a long essay he wrote for *Holiday* after a return visit to the area in 1948. He took his customary great pains to define its social life and sought to correct stereotypical ideas about the mining camps, complaining that “people who think of gold camps solely as assemblages of whores, barrooms, and shanties are thinking in movie terms.” Coates stressed the district’s bohemian atmosphere and indicated that the area had “a cosmopolitan flavor that is rarely mentioned in accounts of the old gold camps.” Frequently “musicians, lecturers and famous actors and actresses on tour with their troupes” visited the area. On one occasion Coates’s mother organized a tea for the Belgian violinist Eugène Ysaÿe (1858–1931), who rewarded the family by giving a recital in their living room. The cosmopolitan, congenial, and bohemian atmosphere that characterized the mining district led Coates at various times to draw a parallel between Cripple Creek and the Paris he encountered in the 1920s.

Events such as Ysaÿe’s recital made the Cripple Creek adventure just bearable to Coates’s middle-class mother, Harriet Coates, “a New Englander, and in many ways a true Victorian.” Harriet was unenthusiastic about her husband’s gold-mining spree and did not feel at home in the area with its “ramshackle, built-for-a-quick-killing-and-then-the-hell-with-it look.” In fact Harriet “regarded the whole life of the place, when it wasn’t definitely menacing, as rough, untutored, and vulgar.” The heavily patronized barrooms and whorehouses, though they may not have dominated, were in plain sight and were a source of embarrassment to her. Coates describes how one day, while walking through the red-light district on their way to the train station, he asked his mother why “we didn’t have a basket of flowers or a bouquet painted on the door, and our name surrounded by curlcues,” but she “paid no heed and just hurried me on.”

Harriet, Coates remembered, was especially fearful of the coarsening influence that the West might have on her son: “She was determined that I, at least, should not be contaminated, and so, through the early part of our stay there, she did her best to make me a little island of Eastern propriety in that vast roily sea of Western freedom. I wore knee pants and long stockings, as a proper boy should, while the other boys wore overalls.” Coates’s eastern clothes and his general air of being a mama’s boy set him apart from the other children. He felt lonely and, like his mother, out of place.
The Cripple Creek adventure ended in 1908. Moving further west Frederick embarked on what Coates described as his “violently variable career.” The family continued to travel, going first to Washington and Oregon, and then working its way slowly back to the East. Coates attended school after school, where he continued to find himself in the role of the new boy. Although he usually was “not only the best but the youngest scholar in [his] class,” Coates did not like school. A shy boy to begin with, he had bright red hair (which earned him a hated nickname “Redcoats”) and a stutter. Writer and cartoonist James Thurber described his friend’s speech impediment, which Coates never quite lost, as follows: “[Coates] is acutely shy in the face of questioning and occasionally stammers in a unique and charming manner—pushing easily past the difficult ‘p’ and ‘b’ and getting enormously involved with the long vowels.”

Brendan Gill, another colleague at the New Yorker, agreed that Coates’s stammer was “attractive rather than nerve-racking.” For the young Coates, however, his stammer was yet another aberration. He later confessed to Ik Shuman, administrative editor of the New Yorker, “when my stuttering began to mark me as unusual, I hated [school].”

Throughout his youth Coates read widely, “puzzling [his] way through books that were . . . far beyond [his] age.” A socially isolated only child, Coates developed a lively imagination and caused his parents considerable bewilderment when, during his teens, he adopted characteristics of fictional characters such as Jack London’s Wolf Larsen, a “conscienceless scoundrel” whose recklessness Coates “simultaneously envied and deplored,” or the fourteenth-century soldier Bertrand DuGuesclin, another symbol of masculine adventurousness, whom he came across in Conan Doyle’s The White Company (1891). Doyle’s novel became a kind of “talisman” for Coates, rousing his interest in the Middle Ages. Other figures the boy imitated were characters from contemporary popular western novels, such as Frank Hamilton Spearman’s Rocky Mountain railroad hero “Whispering Smith” (1906) and Bertha Muzzy Bower’s Montana ranch hero “Chip of the Flying U” (1904), types of heroes from which many boys of Coates’s generation “drew an ethics of ideal conduct in emotional stress.”

Coates’s fondest memories were derived from the period when his family finally settled down into a life of middle-class stability in Rochester, New York. His father had prospered and now owned a machine-designing shop, where he employed a dozen men. The family also owned a car, which Coates loved to drive. (Indeed three of the fifteen chapters in The View from Here are devoted to early automobile days.) The young Coates bathed in the optimism and security that had characterized what Henry Seidel Canby called America’s “Age of Confidence.” The streets of Rochester, as Coates recalled with nostalgia, were “broad, shady, and uncrowded,” the houses “comfortable and well-appointed, set in
ample grounds,” and life itself was “easy, confident, and unhurried.” In short it was “pretty close to Paradise.”

From 1913 to 1915 Coates attended Rochester West High, a school that he remembered with affection. Cheerful and coeducational, it compared favorably with the “strictly disciplined” and “grimly male” Stuyvesant High School in New York, which he had previously attended. Coates thrived and engaged in many school activities, assuming responsibilities as class council member, class secretary, senior annual committee member, and party manager of the Independent Party, a political party responsible for campus affairs. Coates also joined the staff of the West High School magazine, the Occident, and became assistant editor in his first year, then associate editor, and, in his last year, editor in chief. The diversity of his publications in the Occident—short stories, poems, and editorials—presages the variety that characterized his writing career. They also reveal his literary ambitions and budding talent, which did not go unnoticed. After his first year at West High, the senior annual of 1913 noted: “Give Robert a pen, and how he can write; we have bright hopes for his future.”

The Yale Years

Coates graduated from West High in January 1915. In the fall of that year, he matriculated at Yale University in his birthplace, New Haven. In Rochester, Coates had developed a close friendship with the slightly younger student Homer Fickett (West High class of 1916) and corresponded with him from Yale. The letters that Coates wrote to Fickett are the only correspondence in the Robert M. Coates Collection. They provide a glimpse of Coates as an adolescent who was feeling out his personal and literary identity, struggling with the rise of modernity and the decline of Victorian culture, and plumbing the nature and size of his own talents.

In his first report to Fickett, Coates wrote that college life was “first rate” and that he was “having a splendid time generally.” His satisfaction, as he hastened to inform his friend, did not imply that he embraced the affected sophistication that might exist in the prestigious university. Coates resented intellectual snobs, whom he in fact associated with Yale’s rival, Harvard. As Coates wrote Fickett, “And thank—well,—Gracious, I have not yet acquired a ‘Hah-vahd’ accent. Many of our best people are wearing them this year, you know, also [glasses] in great numbers. Gives me a [pain] to tell the truth.”

The young student’s marked distaste for pretentiousness and highbrow intellectualism caused him to be deeply suspicious of the acquisition of “culture,” which Victorian America defined as “a particular part of the heritage from the European past, including polite manners, respect for traditional learning, appreciation of the arts, and above all an informed and devoted love of standard
Soon, however, he discovered much that was to his liking. Coates took five freshman courses: English (Shakespeare, Thomas Carlyle, Tennyson, and John Ruskin), advanced French (a course that involved translation, conversation, and composition), Latin (readings in Livy, Horace, and Terence), European history (fourth through the nineteenth century), and mathematics. At the end of his freshman year, he proclaimed Yale “undoubtedly the best all-round college in the world, bar none” and told Homer Fickett: “You said something when you said culture is worth acquiring. It is down here that you really appreciate that. And here is every opportunity for its acquirement.”

The full extent of Coates’s reevaluation of “culture” is expressed in a letter in the Yale Alumni Magazine, which he wrote on the occasion of the retirement of his English composition teacher, John Berdan. Coates’s remarks reveal how fear-inspiring education had seemed to him as a young man: “Johnny Berdan was about the first person I met in my school-going years who showed me that learning could be compatible with good fellowship and that culture wasn’t something to be afraid of, but instead a means of enriching one’s daily life. The value of this lesson, to a fellow of nineteen or twenty years, can hardly be overestimated.”

The young scholar soon exhibited the familiar symptoms of an aspiring writer. He decorated the wall of his study in Calhoun College with pictures of authors that he liked and asked Fickett to remove frontispiece portraits from books in the Rochester library and send them to him: “I have them framed and hang them in the corner of my room where I have my desk and typewriter, thus lending inspiration to my work. . . . I now have Norris, Kipling, de Maupassant, Browning, Tolstoy, and Dostoevsky.” He regularly wrote poems and sketches which he sent to his friend for evaluation and made several unsuccessful submissions to the Yale Literary Magazine, an important vehicle since 1836 for the Yale student with literary aspirations.

Coates felt increasingly drawn toward New York City, which was rapidly displacing Boston as the new cultural center: “New York’s the place for young blood,” he told Fickett. Still he doubted he could truly be part of it, writing with typical self-mockery, “Wait ’till I graduate, we’ll have a studio on Washington Square. You can write plays for the Players and act them, and I’ll scribble masterful novels.” Coates was curious about Greenwich Village, a site of anti-genteel cultural and political activity. As yet largely uninitiated into the artistic climate of rebellion, he “prowled around hopefully, looking for artists, bohemianism, and, possibly, wickedness.” He frequently attended performances of the Washington Square Players—a less radical forerunner of the Provincetown Players—and delighted in their plays. Soon the area around Washington Square became “pleasantly familiar territory.”
Coates does not seem to have established any meaningful contact with the literary and artistic community in Greenwich Village. Indeed, when in New York, he wanted above all to “really see the town.” Already an observant and solitary walker of city streets, he told Fickett: “I want to take a trip to New York when nobody will know I am there, and not go to see anybody or to go to any shows, but just wander around the picturesque parts of the town.” Despite his curiosity about the modern temperament, Coates did not belong in spirit to the artists and the rebellious young women and young men just out of college who flocked to Manhattan during the first two decades of the twentieth century and whose lifestyle was immortalized by F. Scott Fitzgerald’s novel of flaming youth *This Side of Paradise* (1920). Conscious of his immaturity, the young Coates especially disliked the then fashionable cult of decadent aestheticism and its tendency to replace youthful naïveté with a semblance of skeptical maturity. Coates defined the attitude when he mockingly proposed to Fickett that they “dally” with “the beautiful girls who infest Bagdad-on-the-Subway” and who, “in low, wondering, aristocratic tones, as they puff their cigarettes and idly turn the pages of Boccaccio (unexpurgated) always wonder why we always deal with them cynically, paternally and carelessly.”

Above all Coates’s letters to the more rebellious Homer Fickett reveal how deeply he had incorporated the beliefs that structured Victorian America. Throughout his correspondence Coates assumed a paternal air and gave Homer well-intended though rather heavy-handed advice on matters of love, friendship, and manners, such as “friends should afford mental, moral, physical and social stimulus” and “politeness is an art in which we are all woefully deficient.” For all his dislike of snobbery, Coates evidently ascribed great importance to proper social conduct—an attitude that was furthered by Yale’s emphasis on social success. He thus urged Fickett to stop contenting himself with “silly, aping, kittenish Lizzies and Marys” and to befriend instead girls who have “all the advantages of a better family and standing, and training with better people. They make an ideal of social brilliance, as, I am coming to believe, everyone should, and their company is more pleasing consequently. I feel, and have felt, so strongly on this that I can’t put down my arguments with half the force I desire.”

In his correspondence Coates comes across as an optimist and practical idealist who is strongly committed to conventional morality and who seeks to counteract his friend’s attraction to the decadent, world-weary pose of cynical disenchantment that Coates abhorred. The contrast between the two adolescents yielded amusing and insightful letters. In one of these, Coates indicated his disapproval of his friend’s tendency to move from one girlfriend to another by sending him a humorous adaptation of Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Raven,” which Coates entitled “Homer’s Ravin’(g)s.” The poem reads in part:
The New Boy

Now as shades of evening fall,
Glides my love for aye and all
From pale Everetta’s pall
To Roberta, lithe and small

Often in the shadow’s gloaming, as we wandered,
Homeward roaming,
She, her arms about me clasping, slender arms forever clasping
Sobbingly forever asking, tearfully with passion gasping,
If I loved her truly, truly;
If I loved her truly.\textsuperscript{54}

Coates’s use of his Poe parody to express disapproval of Fickett’s behavior shows that he was as yet inclined to view literature as a moral enterprise, thereby illustrating what H. L. Mencken called the “deplorable American habit to judge writers not as artists, but as Christian men.”\textsuperscript{55} On the same note, Coates ended his letter by bluntly telling his friend: “the new verse libre ought to be in your line.”\textsuperscript{56}

During his years at Yale, Coates had little or no patience with what he referred to as “modernist” writing. Although he did admire Amy Lowell’s free-verse poem “Patterns,” he generally agreed with the opinion that the modernists were lazy and used free verse as a convenient cover for a lack of talent. In addition, he believed, they were indolent in thought, violating literature’s didactic function: “And have you noticed how lazy these modernists are? Besides being too lazy to polish up into real verse form, they have a habit of setting themselves a deep problem, and working right up bravely to the point where, to continue, they must use their head a little, work out an answer, put into words the vague idea of the solution they have in their head—and then they shirk the responsibility, draw a suggestive picture and leave the rest to the overworked reader. Sandburg is full of it. And he’s not alone.”\textsuperscript{57}

In another outburst Coates angrily charged “this modernist stuff—verse libre and drab studies in prose, etc.”—with sensationalism and with flouting traditional stylistic demands: “Lately, this damn morbid, immoral stuff gets my goat. I think ordinary literature (of course, a genius is by divine right permitted to write on anything he desires) should be as true to life as possible, but always, unless otherwise a moral truth will be presented, true to the sunnier side of life. This stuff, morbid and immoral for the sake of sensationalism and risqué to gloss over irregularities of style, I cannot lately bear at all.”\textsuperscript{58}

Despite the portraits of such grim writers as Frank Norris, Guy de Maupassant, and Fyodor Dostoyevsky on his study wall, the young Coates preferred to subscribe to the views of the nineteenth-century proponent of American realism
William Dean Howells. Predictably, though perhaps not always fairly, Howells came to be regarded as the embodiment of the Genteel Tradition and suffered heavy attacks from the twentieth-century moderns and their demand for what Raymond Chandler called “terrible honesty.” At this point in Coates’s development, however, Howells’s dictum that the American novelist should concern himself with “the more smiling aspects of life” because these aspects most adequately represented American social reality was clearly reassuring.

Another revealing debate between Coates and Fickett centered on the merits of the playwright George Bernard Shaw. Shaw had shocked the Victorian world with such plays as *Widowers’ Houses* (1892), which exposed the exploitation of the poor, and *Mrs. Warren’s Profession* (1902), which presented the realities of prostitution. Homer, who had ambitions to become a playwright, felt attracted to the revolutionary Shaw and his harsh criticism of established, bourgeois conventions. Coates predictably advised caution. Although he considered Shaw “all right if not taken too seriously” and “wonderful for the modern surprise plot and irony,” Coates evidently felt that the playwright’s attacks on the artificialities and hypocrisies of the Victorian world went too far.

Coates felt certain that the only thing that the “rant of Shaw” had produced in Fickett was a harmful “superficial spleen.” That attitude, Coates wrote, “I think you got from Shaw, and his cousin Hubbard.” By putting Shaw into the same family with Elbert Hubbard (1865–1915), the prototypical American dandy and editor of, among other things, the decadent and iconoclastic little magazine the *Philistine* (1895–1915), Coates reveals that his grasp of Shaw’s work was superficial. Coates himself readily admitted his lack of understanding—which, he felt, provided the most important reason for rejecting the playwright. As he wrote to Fickett with youthful wisdom: “I don’t think we have reached the proper age of discretion and discernment to plunge into him seriously, trying to pick out the helpful from the injurious.” In other words Shaw was quite simply the “wrong man” for young people to study. Instead of Shaw, Coates recommended that his friend read Stevenson, Shakespeare, O. Henry, Howells, Clemens, Dickens, and Thackeray on the grounds that “it won’t do any harm if we don’t understand them.” Coates rested his case against Shaw by solemnly proclaiming, “No philosophy of life can be grounded on the premise that the world, or any part of it, is or can be wrong.” Coates’s unwavering belief in the basic rightness of things reflects his thorough grounding in the convictions of the Progressive Era.

Coates’s tendency toward optimistic idealism drew him to the writing of William Sydney Porter (1862–1910), better known as O. Henry. Beside his admiration for Porter’s seemingly effortless technique, the aspiring writer was impressed by the “clean and optimistic” nature of his work: “I marvel at how he
The New Boy

portrays New York entire without once introducing uncleanness, mental, spiritual or sexual.” Without realizing the paradoxical nature of his statement, Coates illustrated that his commitment to realism was still limited. During his sophomore year he took courses in British literature, French literary history, American political history, German, and—no doubt as a result of his life in Cripple Creek—two courses in geology: dynamical geology and historical geology. That same year his commitment to Porter grew, and Coates began collecting Porter’s complete works. The aspiring writer studied Porter’s technique carefully and considered him “one of the best men I know to study for ease and freedom of style and surprise of plot.”

Yet Coates seems to have been well aware of the writer’s shortcomings and was convinced that “of course, [O. Henry] is not lasting.” For the time being, however, Coates did not mind Porter’s limitations. The young student appears to have objected to all writing that might shatter the illusion of Victorian confidence and security and that would prematurely destroy the innocence of himself and others. As he wrote Fickett: “We are both at an age of dreams, illusions, fantasy, living in Arcadia, wandering in love, romance, guess, impracticality, unsophistication. Soon enough, I think, all this will be destroyed and we’ll land on hard fact. We don’t want to hurry the process.”

Near the end of his sophomore year, Coates’s efforts to publish in the *Yale Literary Magazine* were rewarded with the acceptance of a short story, “Half-Man.” The story had been rejected by the editorial board for 1917, but in the spring of 1917, the new board of the *Yale Literary Magazine*—William Douglas, Pierson Underwood, Wilmarth Lewis, the fledgling playwright Philip Barry, and the future publisher John Farrar—asked Coates to resubmit some of his material. They promptly published “Half-Man” and printed “The Yellow Carpet,” a brief prose sketch, in the first issue of the next academic year.

Junior year was crucial in Coates’s development. He took seven courses, four of which were in literature: The Age of Shakespeare, English Poets of the Nineteenth Century, French Literature of the Eighteenth Century (Le Sage, Voltaire, Diderot, Rousseau), and French Literature of the Seventeenth Century (Descartes, Corneille, Racine, Molière, Pascal, and others). Coates also took a course in psychology, which covered, among other things, the criminal and the abnormal mind—a likely influence on his impressive portrayals of psychological disorders in his later fiction. The two remaining courses were in English composition; Daily Themes, a class on style and personal expression, and the more formal Essay Writing. Both courses were taught by John Berdan.

Coates’s confidence grew. In addition to his heartening success with the *Yale Literary Magazine*, whose editorial board he joined in the spring of 1918, he
became a member of a literary fraternity, Chi Delta Theta, where he found himself in the company of several young men who would have distinguished literary careers: poet Stephen Vincent Benét, playwrights Thornton Wilder and Philip Barry, and future founder and editor of *Time*, Henry Luce.

Coates benefited from the opportunities provided by Yale University’s literary renaissance. Several developments combined to create this renaissance, among them the start of the Yale University Press in 1908 and the reorganization of the *Yale Review* as a literary quarterly in 1911. In addition, with lecturers in English literature such as “[Thomas] Lounsbury, [Henry] Beers, Chauncey [Brewster] Tinker and William Lyon Phelps, Yale had outgrown its earlier indifference to letters. . . . The breeze that was blowing over literary Yale was to have its effect on the new generation of writers, brilliant groups of whom were at nurse there.”

In his memoir Coates credits Tinker, and, as he fondly refers to them, “Johnny Berdan” and “Billy Phelps.” There is no doubt that the university’s support of literary achievement as “a new category of Yale’s definition of success” contributed to the “feeling of awakening” that Coates experienced some months into his third year. For the first time, he began seriously to believe in the feasibility of pursuing a literary career: “One secret I feel I must confide. I think I am just coming along to the vaguest beginning of a start. Freshman year, you must know, my lazy roommate and I neglected studies and college in a vain pursuit of the goddess Cinema, so in sophomore year I made no fraternity [sic], and did not get on very well with the Lit. But toward the end of the year I got “Half-Man” in print, and now the first number this year has a sketch of mine [“The Yellow Carpet”]. . . . All exteriors so far, because I can’t hope to express how much more confident I am, and how much more readily I forego sport, and shows and so on to read or work, and how I have forgotten the old tendency to take economics and work for a desk and an office, and a place in business instead of trying, uselessly to be a writer. Of course, I haven’t lost any of the awe, or the realization of how hard it is, and I appreciate about ten times as clearly how rotten and immature, and crude my work still is. . . . It’s just that it all seems more worth while, and more within reach.”

Still, however, there were doubts. Despite his increased self-confidence and enthusiasm, Coates continued to fear that to become a writer he would have to adopt the very cultural sophistication of which he continued to feel wary and scornful. This dilemma came to the surface through his increased association with “some fellows who are very literary,” specifically Wilder, Benét, and the composer Arthur Hague, all of whom Coates accurately predicted would become “the men, undoubtedly, that will be spoken of in my generation.” Coates felt attracted to their lifestyle, in which music and literature played a large role; but
to his confusion, he experienced not the slightest feeling of belonging: “Altogether, I have been thrown in with the people I want to live my life with. And the disillusionment!”

The main cause of this sobering discovery was Thornton Wilder, who had recently arrived at Yale from Oberlin College, where he had “cut a figure and cultivated the manner of the aesthete.” As Coates wrote: “It was Thornton, and is Thornton, who disappoints, disillusiones me, alternately cheers me up and depresses me.” Although Coates felt that there was “much to be admired in him,” Wilder struck Coates as “essentially a poseur” and as a man with “a boundless conceit” who “absolutely believes in himself.” Coates was puzzled: in spite of all these (for Coates) undesirable qualities, his rival was making “a tremendous hit,” both among the students and the professors, “who ought to know talent when they see it.” Coates admitted that “that is what discourages me, because I have so little in common with him.” Not one to adopt an aesthetic position that ran counter to his convictions, Coates was momentarily at a loss. Before he solved his dilemma by dismissing aestheticism as a literary option, Coates feared that becoming a writer would violate his innermost principles. He struggled to convince himself that neither insincere snobbery nor cultivated affectation were required of the true artist: “And again, after I have about irrevocably decided that I am not an artist, that literati are all affected, quotation-mouthers, featherers in the wind of public opinion, wearers, hit-and-miss of the cloak of criticism poseurs, I am upraised by the assurance that after all, my friends are turgid, unreal, flamboyant, exotic, that perhaps Zola, de Maupassant, Shakespeare would not have felt quite at home, that many true artists do not affect the smock and sandal, and long hair and fingernails.”

In addition to Coates’s abhorrence of the aesthetes’ manifestations of ostentation, conceit, and effeminacy, the young writer also dismissed their literary ideas. He thus took issue with Wilder’s belief, as Coates paraphrased it, that “words are words, to be used first for effect, secondly for truth,” and felt that Wilder admired certain writers for the wrong reasons: “He is fond of Rupert Brooke, of James Joyce . . . Walter Pater, and so on, all good men, especially the first and last, but he takes the wrong side. He raves over such things as ‘the azure-lidded hours’ [and] ‘silent thunders.’” In contrast Coates found fault with such phrases as Baudelaire’s “the silent thunders played among the leaves.” Although he admired the beauty and suggestiveness of this juxtaposition, Coates felt it was “weak . . . in the incompatibility, the absolute and eternal fallacy of ‘silent thunder.’ This Thornton does not understand.” Coates probably had studied John Ruskin’s essay “The Pathetic Fallacy,” which denounced this practice of attributing human thoughts or sensations to inanimate objects or nature and argued that although there were points when “all feverish and wild fancy becomes just
and true,” the pathetic fallacy was “always the sign of a morbid state of mind, and comparatively of a weak one.”

Wilder in sum was “the epitome of Art, ‘Art.’” His work, Coates felt, was “utterly vague, diffuse, without point [and] does not convey any definite message or moral, is just high playing with words.” By contrast, Coates wrote, “I am coming more and more to embrace realism.”

Coates’s notion of realism and the demands and restrictions that this literary mode placed on him was still in a somewhat muddled stage, which is illustrated in the young writer’s admiration for the clean and elegant optimism of O. Henry and W. D. Howells on the one hand, and his attraction to the harsh naturalist themes of Zola, de Maupassant, and Norris on the other. Interestingly the short stories that Coates published in the *Yale Literary Magazine* between April 1917 and December 1918 exactly reflect these two forms of realism.

The first of his stories was the powerful and disturbing “Half-Man.” It is unknown exactly when Coates first wrote it, but in February 1917 he told Fickett that he was rewriting it. Perhaps encouraged by Stephen Vincent Benét’s publication of “Rain after a Vaudeville Show” in the *Seven Arts* in January, Coates revealed his intention to submit “Half-Man” to this same magazine, which he had recently discovered: “I feel discouragingly sure they won’t take it, but if they do——!! * ? * @!! Anyway, I’m anxious to see how they reject it.”

The *Seven Arts*, a highly influential modernist magazine and one of the era’s several exponents of literary nationalism, might well have liked Coates’s story for its setting and implicit social criticism, but no documentation of an exchange between the magazine and Coates has survived. The *Yale Literary Magazine* published “Half-Man” in April 1917.

The story, in which the author shows himself quite capable of portraying the harsher realities of life, describes several confrontations with “Half-Man,” a term for what the unsympathetic narrator views as degenerate specimens of humanity. The prose piece is uncomfortably convincing in its rendition of the narrator’s disgust and fierce contempt for the emotional and physical squalor associated with what he regards as low life. Intended as a critique of Social Darwinism—the belief, popular in the late nineteenth century and beyond, that Darwin’s theory of natural selection implied that only “superior” people could gain wealth and power—the story grimly exposes the contemptuous behavior of the rich toward the common people, particularly the poor, and criticizes the supposed scientific justification for this attitude. In its concern for social responsibility, the story points ahead to the writer’s later extensive treatment of this issue.

Coates’s second publication, in the first issue of the *Yale Literary Magazine* during the next academic year, was “The Yellow Carpet,” a brief prose sketch set at an idyllic country house by a riverbank. The house, which is surrounded by a yellow carpet of daffodils, is inhabited by an old woman, a cat, and a little girl.
A dark cloud glides over this Norman Rockwellian pastoral scene; the old woman, sitting in her rocking chair, suddenly dies, and the girl runs off, it is suggested, to drown herself. The tragedy goes unnoticed: “Isn’t it beautiful,” the passersby say, “and the daffodils are so pretty. But see, some one has trampled through them to the water’s edge.” The irony that tragedy and despair lie beyond the most peaceful and most reassuringly pastoral scene recurs in much of Coates’s later work.

Coates’s third publication, one month later, was “Flickers,” a story set in an unsavory moving-picture house on Orange Street in New Haven. The setting, like that of “Half-Man,” clearly reveals how Coates’s Norris-like exploration of the “romance of the commonplace” directed him toward popular culture. Popular culture, which produced democratic American art that had its roots in metropolitan modernity, had great appeal to many contemporary American writers, notably those associated with the Seven Arts, and poets E. E. Cummings, Hart Crane, and William Carlos Williams. At the same time, although many American moderns celebrated popular culture for its liveliness, spontaneity, and ungenteel and unpuritan characteristics, these moderns were very much alive to its dangers, especially its uniformity of taste, superficiality, vulgarity, and commercialism. The cinema was a case in point. In a publication for the New Republic in 1915, Randolph Bourne, a literary nationalist associated with the Seven Arts, clearly illustrates the equivocality of the moderns’ response. Bourne had visited the cinema to explore the “heart of the people,” and although he had felt a “certain unholy glee at this wholesale rejection of what our fathers reverenced as culture,” he was seriously troubled by what had been substituted: “We seem to be witnessing a lowbrow snobbery. In a thousand ways it is as tyrannical and arrogant as the other culture of universities and millionaires and museums . . . . It looks as if we should have to resist the stale culture of the masses as we resist the stale culture of the aristocrat.”

Coates’s treatment of the cinema displays similar misgivings. “Flickers” was published in the Yale Literary Magazine in November 1917, simultaneously with its author’s confession that, during his freshman year he had “neglected college and studies in the vain pursuit of the Goddess Cinema.” “Flickers” may well be interpreted as an illustration of his realization, and perhaps disappointment, that his pursuit of the art of the people had been in vain. In the story the democratic, nonelitist setting turns into a scene of immorality that befouls the narrator’s notion of love. In addition, rather than encountering a spontaneous, living art form, the narrator sees an unimaginative, formulaic instance of what Gilbert Seldes called “mass-produced mediocrity.” Coates conveys the predictability and monotony of the movie, in both form and content: “[It was] called ‘A Husband Betrayed,’ or ‘Man and Wife,’ or something of the sort, and it portrayed,
in a series of surpassingly badly acted scenes, how the villain motors in the country, and the husband ploughs a field, and the wife makes bread in the kitchen, and the villain still motors, and then his chauffeur stops and looks under the hood, and the villain strolls to yon nearby farmhouse, and the wife takes the bucket to the well, and the villain asks for a drink and gets it, and smiles at her over the rim of the cup and the husband wipes his brow at the end of a furrow, and the villain will not let the wife carry the bucket back, but does it himself, and—I turned to look at my neighbors."

The interrelatedness of art and life that popular culture could reveal is here betrayed by the banality and vulgarity of the mediocre movie and its “low-life” setting. This perception is made explicit when the narrator discovers that the intrigue on the screen is paralleled in the audience, where a presumably cuck-oladed husband is scrutinizing a “fat woman and a man murmuring and laughing hoarsely.” The “disgusting pair” violates the narrator's idea of romance, but it is the fat woman's deviation from traditional moral norms that is portrayed as especially offensive, and she speaks with a voice that has “all the coarseness and roughness of a masculine brutality.” Like the movie, the story ends on a promise of violence to come—an ending that is characteristic of many of Coates’s later short stories for the *New Yorker*. An embrace of popular culture, “Flickers” strongly suggests, does not necessarily provide redeeming features.

In contrast to the grim intensity of the urban stories “Half-Man” and “Flickers,” the last two short stories Coates published in the *Yale Literary Magazine* reflect his commitment to the more cheerful and urbane realist aesthetics of Howells and O. Henry. Coates regarded “A Harmless Flirtation” as “certainly the best thing I have done so far.” Written in a somewhat labored and consciously literary style, the story deals with a classic O. Henry situation in which a well-educated, cultured city youth, Sherwin, visits a small country town to spend his holiday. A selfishly confident and flamboyant young man, he engages in what he thinks of as a harmless flirtation with an attractive country girl, Mary, who lives in near desperation with a violent and alcoholic father on a desolate farm. Indifferent to the fact that he is giving Mary false hope for an improved future, Sherwin dallies with her. When the girl’s disapproving father confronts Sherwin with a gun, the cowardly boy runs straight to the station and boards the first train he sees. Sherwin is thus revealed as a miserable failure. The melodramatic story underlines the importance that Coates attached to morally sound behavior and sensitivity toward others; like “Half-Man,” the story communicates the culpability of those who believe themselves to be superior to others.

Coates used the same theme in “Meddlers with Circumstance,” a second country story, in which he tried his skills at the surprise ending and the easy narrative style he admired in O. Henry. The story is in the tradition of the “morally