Politics, broadly conceived, permeated the culture of the 1950s, from the visibility of the Red Scare and media coverage of the civil rights movement, to the near-invisibility of covert CIA actions and the subtle ways an individual might internalize social norms. It was therefore hardly possible to produce writing in the 1950s without it being marked by “politics” in some way. In this sense, politics appears in the literature of the period as a subject or theme, but should also be understood as a gesture, as something perhaps indirect within a text but which we can perceive in our retrospective readings.

Politics was certainly not new to the literature of this era, but the tone had shifted away from the class-conscious, Leftist writing of much literature marked as “political” in the generation before, such as Michael Gold’s *Jews without Money* (1930), Richard Wright’s early works, Eugene O’Neill’s International Workers of the World-praising play *The Hairy Ape* (1922), Lauren Gilfillan’s *I Went to Pit College* (1931), and others. In the 1950s, we find the general tone slightly tempered by the Red Scare (for an alternative view, see Chapter 20). There is a mix of overtly politically themed pieces dealing with that cultural atmosphere, as well as many works treating politically charged issues in more coded ways. Politically themed works appear in a variety of genres and tonal registers, from political thriller, to oblique allegory, to outright satire. The range encompasses all fictional subgenres, as well. For instance, in hard-boiled detective fiction, pulp writers like Jim Thompson, a former Communist Party member who came up through the Federal Writers Project, and Dashiell Hammett, a lifelong Party member who was called before Joseph McCarthy’s congressional subcommittee, wrote about crime, sure, but also about class-conscious justice. Conversely, right-leaning Mickey Spillane uses his character Mike Hammer to mete out vigilante justice in clear-cut, pro-American ways, with “Little room for subtleties” and a hatred for “‘commies,’ crime and women” on behalf of those who are “too weak to do anything about it, or are too young and stupid to
realize what’s at stake.” The same tropes are found in Westerns and Science Fiction, where allegories of justifiable warfare may be found alongside narratives that seem to question the advancement of nuclear technology or foreign occupation (in the guise of encroachment on Indian territory or a new planet). While some texts clearly examine, expose, or critique the postwar political environment, other literary works engage in “cultural politics” in more subtle ways, such as taking on pervasive cultural attitudes regarding consumerism or sexuality. In an era that sometimes has been nostalgically washed of the presumed politically charged qualities of the 1930s or 1960s, texts that do not seem political on the surface may offer symbolic questions or understandings of the ways in which actual politics inflect the everyday.

All sorts of narratives were vying for attention in the public sphere of mainstream America in the 1950s. One could argue that these narratives were contending for a cultural space that attempted to define what it meant to be American in the decade that saw the furthering of US global dominance after World War II. The nostalgia imposed on the period during the 1970s and 1980s tended to elide the political. Movies like Grease (1978) and American Graffiti (1973), television shows like Happy Days (1974–1984) and Laverne & Shirley (1976–1983), and the seemingly ubiquitous “fifties day” at schools around the country tended to focus on the interpersonal, pop culture, and fashion. There were token episodes touching on politics in the 1950s here and there in the early years of Happy Days, such as Richie working on an Adlai Stevenson campaign, or his family befriending a black character for the 22-minute duration of an episode. For a while, there seems to have been a willful push to forget the politics of the period, but scholarly work on the era since the 1980s has focused on retrieving and reexamining such political elements.

Despite the powerful forces at work during the 1950s to silence many nonmainstream political views, there was always a plurality of voices at work in the literature of the period, and political exposé spanned the “long fifties” in works as varying as Robert Penn Warren’s biting treatment of southern politics in All the King’s Men (1946) and Joseph Heller’s satire of military bureaucracy in Catch-22 (1961). One major way politics and literature intersected in the 1950s was in writers’ overt engagement with McCarthyism. Take, for example, Richard Condon’s political thriller The Manchurian Candidate (1959). Just a few years after Senator Joseph McCarthy’s public campaign to expose communists in the US government, Condon shaped a not-so-thinly veiled critique of McCarthyism in his character Senator Johnny Iselin and his communist-baiting “Iselinism.”
Condon mimics transcriptions of McCarthy’s public declarations, with obvious attempts to make McCarthy/Iselin come across as a bumbling political opportunist:

SEN ISELIN: Yesterday morning I – uh – discussed the – uh – Communists high up in the – uh – Defense Department. I stated that I had names of – uh – fifty-eight card-carrying members of the Communist party. Now – uh – I say this. They must be driven out!

The stumbling dialogue is coupled with Condon’s depiction of the manipulative woman behind the scenes, Mrs. Iselin, whose work to develop the Senator’s strategy involves careful calculations and manipulations of State Department employment dismissal records, which are then suggested to be ideologically motivated firings, and then finally spun into proof that those fired were “card-carrying Communists” (131). However, the novel does not simply present a one-sided critique of McCarthyist conservative politics in the US. With its depiction of the psychological programming of Mrs. Iselin’s son Raymond Shaw as a prisoner of war during the Korean War – and its implication of Mrs. Iselin as a double agent working for both Communist China and the Soviet KGB – the novel’s suspense hinges on the seemingly pervasive reach of Communist forces throughout the world, even into America’s national political party conventions. In this sense, the novel posits not one political view, but a caution against all forms of ideological extremism as well as against trusting the surface presentation of any politician.

Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible* (1953) takes on McCarthyism, too, but in an allegorical way. Miller’s now-famous play about mass hysteria and “naming names” during the Salem witch trials of 1692 forced audiences in his day to reflect on the unnecessary persecution within our own history – a history that clearly hadn’t been learned from. Contemporary theater audiences would have seen the clear parallels, which Miller spoke about pointedly in later years. The playwright himself had been called before a congressional committee in 1956 about his participation in Communist organizations before the war. These hearings occurred after the censure of Joseph McCarthy, but the committee was clearly still caught up in the anti-Communist fervor that began with the Hollywood blacklists in 1947 and whose flames were fanned by McCarthy. When thinking back on the fear McCarthy created in his day, Miller captures the powerful persona: “films of Senator Joseph McCarthy are rather unsettling – if you remember the fear he once spread. Buzzing his truculent sidewalk brawler’s snarl through the hairs in his nose, squinting through his cat’s eyes and sneering like a

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*Politics*
villain, he comes across now as nearly comical, a self-aware performer keeping a straight face as he does his juicy threat-shtick.” In a videotaped interview later in his life, Miller explains his reasons for dealing with McCarthyism obliquely, claiming, “the reason I think that I moved in that direction was that it was simply impossible any longer to discuss what was happening to us in contemporary term[s]. There had to be some distance given to the phenomenon. We were all going slightly crazy trying to be honest, and trying to see straight, and trying to be safe.” He admits, too, that the confusion and fear were not entirely unfounded, but that the rhetorical interpretations of recent global politics had wiped away the possibility of ideological gray areas: “McCarthy’s power to stir fears of creeping Communism was not entirely based on illusion, of course; the paranoid, real or pretended, always secretes its pearl around a grain of fact. From being our wartime ally, the Soviet Union rapidly became an expanding empire.” Yet, “Capitalism, in the opinion of many, myself included, had nothing more to say, its final poisoned bloom having been Italian and German Fascism.”

Many educators teach Shirley Jackson’s 1948 short story “The Lottery” alongside *The Crucible* because of its use of allegory, too, and its focus on the dynamics of societal buy-in to scapegoating for the common good. Unlike Arthur Miller, however, Jackson publicly denied that her story of a village’s random selection of one community member to stone to death each year, in order to guarantee their health and crops, functioned as anything other than a general study of human nature in social groups. (Later, she admitted to friends that it was an allegory for anti-Semitism.) Her biographer notes that Jackson’s “political knowledge was almost nonexistent, her world almost entirely private and personal, but Shirley understood the Holocaust.” The public outrage over the story, then, may have been due in part to its appearance so soon after the Holocaust (and before it was yet being studied and written about); many people simply were not ready to revisit the depths of human cruelty so recently enacted on a world stage.

On the other end of the tonal spectrum lies the kind of critique sallied by satire, such as Leonard Wibberley’s popular *The Mouse That Roared* (1955), which spoofed US postwar foreign relations. In the story, the fictional tiny European Duchy of Grand Fenwick declares war on the US because California’s growing wine industry – and its cultivation of a grape much like the highly specialized Pinot Grand Fenwick – is threatening the Duchy’s only economic resource. As part of its strategy, its leadership baits the US by pretending that Communism is taking hold there. The people of the Duchy are so enamored of their class system, however, that they know not even
democracy could take root. As the duchess argues, “wouldn’t you like trying to be a Communist for a while? Even if you don’t like it, remember that it’s for your country. It’s an act of patriotism to help us survive.” Through the perspective of the Duchy’s people, the novel pokes fun at American political dispositions in a variety of ways, such as noting how declaring war on the US won’t be a long-term problem because “the Americans will forgive anything” and ally with former enemies. The American sense of guilt also produces great benefits for those against whom they have fought wars; according to Count Mountjoy, who is hatching the plan for US foreign aid via a declaration of war, “the ink is no sooner dry on such agreements than the United States is rushing food, machinery, clothing, money, building materials, and technical aid for the relief of its former foes” (42–43). Of course, what unfolds is an absurd plot in which the small envoy of soldiers from Grand Fenwick travels to the US, fails to be recognized as an invading army, and ends up taking the US’s new “Q-bomb” back home. The Duchy then uses the Q-bomb as leverage to negotiate with its “enemy” and all ends well, with the classic romantic comedy conclusion of a wedding between members of the warring states. In the end, we learn that the bomb is actually impotent, when the scientist who developed it realizes “That hairpin of Mrs. Reiner’s, my landlady, which I used for a spring was of poor quality, and so we are all safe.” Since only two people know the truth, though, the bomb remains hidden in the Duchy as continuing leverage against larger nations, rendering it “a better bomb than ever” (279–80).

The aftermath of World War II was a topic that quite a few writers took on, in oblique ways like the aforementioned case of Jackson’s “The Lottery,” and in overt ways, as in John Hersey’s *Hiroshima* (1946), Norman Mailer’s *The Barbary Shore* (1951), or Hermann Hagedorn’s long poem *The Bomb that Fell on America* (1946). The poem offers a perspective for “Moral Re-Armament,” criticizing from an unusual stance in postwar literature—religious morality—the research to develop the atom bomb and the decision to deploy it in Japan:

The bomb that fell on Hiroshima fell on America, too.
It fell on no city, no munition plants, no docks.
It erased no church, vaporized no public building,
    reduced no man to his atomic elements.
But it fell, it fell.
It burst. It shook the land.  

Much literary concern over the nuclear armament issue was deflected through Red Scare rhetoric, one in which the ethical questions over our
responsibility for developing the atomic bomb were downplayed with the necessity for self-defense. Quickly, it seems, living with the bomb became an everyday reality.

In contrast to Wibberley’s raucous Mouse, William J. Lederer and Eugene Burdick take on more seriously the US’s postwar chauvinism and consequent foreign policy gaffs in the novel The Ugly American (1958). While focused more on intercultural ethics, they take on smaller technologies than the atomic bomb, as well. Until the Eastern Bloc fell in the 1980s, The Ugly American was standard curriculum fare for young high school students. In it, an accessible series of interrelated short pieces convey the range of types we might find working as US representatives abroad, particularly in Southeast Asia. There are the ugly Americans who know little about the cultures in which they are living, focused on imposing American political ideals, military strategies, and Western technologies upon small fictional countries in the process of decolonization and economic development. These ugly Americans range from corrupt Senators, to arrogant military officers, to US ambassadors and press agents who reenact colonial black-tie social life with little regard for the native populations. Other vignettes focus on the committed, hard-working types the authors clearly came to admire through their firsthand experiences abroad, such as the idealistic and open-minded ambassador Gilbert MacWhite. MacWhite attempts to change foreign service culture in the fictional country of Sarkhan (a country reminiscent of Vietnam) by advocating that US representatives be required to learn the native language, to live among the people and help them develop their own technologies using locally available resources, to not be allowed to bring their own American cars, and to be required to read the writings of Mao Tse-tung, Lenin, Marx, and Engels so that they will better understand the ideologies competing for the allegiance of the locals. He argues, “the little things we do must be moral acts and they must be done in the real interest of the peoples whose friendship we need — not just in the interest of propaganda.” Along with MacWhite, the title character is literally, physically an “ugly American” (Homer Atkins), whose behavior is not ugly, as he enacts the kind of ethos MacWhite begs for. An engineer contracted by the US government, Atkins fights large-scale infrastructure projects that are culturally unfeasible and works with the locals of Sarkhan to develop bicycle-powered irrigation systems. In many ways, Lederer and Burdick’s work is prescient of the coming troubles in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, and they also lay out a plan of action that will be taken up by the likes of the Peace Corps and various nongovernmental agencies within a decade of the book’s publication.
Other writers focus more on the domestic front, and on the ways in which marginalized populations are drawn into postwar politics. For instance, James Baldwin takes on not just the socio-political issue of race in his famous 1955 essay collection *Notes of a Native Son*, but also comments overtly on the political machine, the limitations of the Progressive Party, and the “Negro” perspective on politics in the early years of the civil rights movement. He notes, “It is considered a rather cheerful axiom that all Americans distrust politicians. (No one takes the further and less cheerful step of considering just what effect this mutual contempt has on either the public or the politicians, who have, indeed very little to do with one another.) Of all Americans, Negroes distrust politicians most, or more accurately, have been trained to expect nothing from them.” Even black politicians, he argues, are a source of pride more than of hope for practical change: “But as no housewife expects Marian Anderson’s genius to be of any practical aid in her dealings with the landlord, so nothing is expected of Negro representatives.” He sees the collective black vote more as a poker chip for individual gains than as a real avenue for social change. Stated bluntly and in terms of the literary colonial subaltern, he argues “Like Aziz in *A Passage to India* or Topsy in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, they know that white people, whatever their love for justice, have no love for them.”

In fiction, we see this sense of black political operators as tools for a progressive agenda – but not as loved human beings – in the famous scenes of the Brotherhood in Ralph Ellison’s influential 1952 novel *Invisible Man*. Most people tend to read the Brotherhood as a thinly veiled version of the Communist Party, though Ellison never directly named it as such. The Brotherhood represents any political organization that tries to deploy racial issues for its own ideological gains, and this is certainly how Ellison felt about the Communist Party of the USA (CPUSA). Some scholars have argued that this allegorical critique’s appearance in the midst of the congressional “witch hunts” serves as a gesture to distance Ellison from his own past flirtations with the organization. However, the protagonist gradually realizes that he and the other representatives of “the Negro Problem” at the Harlem office of the Brotherhood are pawns for promoting the group’s “scientific” approach to politics; its leaders ignore the Harlem office’s recommendations regarding the issues that are of greater, immediate concern in the everyday lives of the community members. We see this most obviously in the famous scene of the protagonist’s former colleague Tod Clifton selling Sambo string puppets on the sidewalk, after which he is gunned down by the police. Scholar Amy Carreiro argues that the
representation of the Brotherhood is less about Ellison’s playing a politically safe game in the 1950s – or of becoming more conservative himself – than it is a long-developed and well thought-out critique of CPUSA’s shortcomings and exploitation of African Americans.¹⁰

In many ways, some of the era’s most overtly progressive politics appear in the writings of the Beat movement. Within the countercultural social critique of works like Allen Ginsberg’s Howl and Other Poems (1956) and Jack Kerouac’s searchingly Buddhist novel The Dharma Bums (1958) lies a political gesture rooted in a rejection of capitalism and its seemingly dehumanizing forces. Allen Ginsberg’s poem “America” (1956) also acknowledges that there are still Leftist ideologues in the population of a seemingly conservative culture. He personifies the nation and confronts its attempts to deny its own pluralism, asking, “When will you be worthy of your million Trotskyites?” He goes on to admit defiantly, “America I feel sentimental about the Wobblies,” and “America I used to be a communist when I was a kid and I’m not sorry.”¹¹ In the whole of the poem, Ginsberg takes on not only a restriction of political pluralism, but also the larger national culture that seemed to be forgetting its pluralities while forging a mainstream culture focused on middle-class, economic success and Protestant values.

While there are many more examples of literary works that overtly take on political topics, recent scholars of 1950s literature and culture have also emphasized how seemingly apolitical novels may actually evince political engagement. This political engagement, however, is less about treatment of political figures and institutions and more about the politics of the personal. The phrase “the personal is political” did not come into popular use until the early 1970s women’s movement, but it is a concept that certainly applies to the 1950s in terms of how cultural forces influenced personal behaviors and determined one’s cultural value – whether in terms of conformity or rebellion.¹² Indeed, the everyday political that occurred within the contexts of larger foreign policy and legislative debates manifested itself in the culture, in the promotion and validation of personal behaviors in keeping with national ideals and contributing to a sense of social harmony and unity.

For a while, the critical paradigm of “containment” seemed quite useful for looking back at such works for political subtext (see Chapter 1).¹³ The concept provided an understanding of how living within the culture of fear in the Atomic Age – contained destruction – also “contained” personal expression and behaviors. Readings of literary works and other cultural narratives in this context, then, often posited them in binaries, as representing or opposing containment. More recently, scholars have moved...
away from binary thinking about the era (i.e., that 1950s texts represent either cultural "containment" or provide groundwork for "emergence" in the 1960s). While containment perhaps underestimates some writers’ abilities to openly critique the climate in which they lived, as Josh Lukin writes, "Emergence risks a parallel excess to that of Containment: it can fall in the everything-is-subversive school of cultural studies and ignore oppressive ideological forces, or at least overestimate the freedom fifties Americans had to move outside them." Leerom Medovoi cautions, too, that we should not read resistance narratives as separate from, or simply in opposition to, the conformist elements of the culture, but as part of a larger "cultural matrix."14

In this sense, we might not focus so much on the contrast in tone and approach between Ginsberg’s poetry and Sloan Wilson’s novel The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit (1955), positing one as rebellious and the other as contained. Instead, a nuanced reading of Wilson’s novel finds surprising allegiance to Beat sensibility within in its own conventional setting. Rather than confront the capitalist machine angrily, Wilson presents the story of a man’s quiet descent into misery as he pursues the white-collar, materialist prosperity presented as the ideal of postwar society. The narrative presents an implicit critique of consumer culture writ large, since those who participate as producers within white-collar, commercial culture are the ones who help to create and perpetuate the largely consumer imperatives that were widely promoted through advertising and marketing as an important part of cultural citizenship and national pride. Tom Rath, the novel’s World War II veteran protagonist, is urged by his wife to find a more lucrative position than the one he enjoys at a small private foundation. He moves to a higher-paying job doing publicity work in the commercial television industry, pursuing prestige and buying a bigger, fancier house, until (no surprise here) he discovers he is disengaged from the work, unhappy with his material success, and alienated from his family. The kind of work Tom Rath does involves the business of selling definitions of what Toby Miller calls cultural citizenship: “A public is formed and governed via a technology of the cultural subject known as the cultural citizen, the virtuous political participant who is taught how to scrutinize and improve her or his conduct through the work of cultural policy.”15 For decades, until displaced by Don Draper and his Mad Men, the gray flannel suit itself functioned as an emblem of unhappy, white-collar success. The culture embraced that icon as a sort of critique, while working very little to actually change the nation’s privileging of a growing corporate culture.16
Gwendolyn Brooks’s lyrical novella *Maud Martha* (1953) also quietly ponders the costs of cultural citizenship in her depiction of a young African American mother on Chicago’s South Side, one eager to participate in the commodity culture that marked active participation in American culture—but one unwelcome within it because of racial barriers. Set during the early days of World War II, we see the author’s most active critique in a culminating scene at Macy’s, where the protagonist’s would-be participation in building the struggling American economy is thwarted when the department store Santa Claus will not allow her daughter on his lap.17

As early as the war’s end we see “cultural subject” protagonists (fictional and nonfictional) serving as the foci of politically nuanced critique, as they negotiate their positions within the newly redefined parameters of American cultural citizenship. The positing of personal identities that fall outside of Anglo-American mainstream cultural narratives can serve as critique of public and cultural policies, such as in Carlos Bulosan’s autobiography *America Is in the Heart* (1946), which simultaneously critiques the institutional forces that mistreat immigrants and asserts undying faith in the American ideals overlooked by lawmakers and the discriminatory actions of everyday citizens. Within breaths of one another are blunt critiques, such as “in many ways it was a crime to be a Filipino in California,” and patriotic idealisms: “American is not merely a land or an institution. America is in the heart of men that died for freedom; it is also in the eyes of men that are building a new world [. . .] America is also the nameless foreigner, the homeless refugee, the hungry boy begging for a job and the black body dangling on a tree.”18

As Gore Vidal demonstrates, America is also the “queer.” In his novel *The City and the Pillar* (1948), he exposes the private homosocial world within the military culture of what came later to be known as the Greatest Generation. A few years after Vidal’s novel was released (to much scandal and professional risk for the author) McCarthy also participated in Red Scare–like work to purge homosexuals from employment in the State Department. Along with the well-known ban on gays serving openly in the military, Executive Order 10450 under the Eisenhower administration sought to ban “Any criminal, infamous, dishonest, immoral, or notoriously disgraceful conduct, habitual use of intoxicants to excess, drug addiction, [or] sexual perversion.” The rationale behind the executive order was that “perversion” made one susceptible to corruption in general, and, consequently, available to any subversive forces that wanted access to government information, such as a Soviet agent who might blackmail the homosexual with the threat of public exposure in exchange for state secrets.19 Here,
then, is very specifically a public policy that regulates personal behaviors. That Gore Vidal was willing to out a character who was at one time a heralded athlete, then a mover in elite Hollywood circles, then a soldier, represents a bold offensive cultural move. In his novel he targets the major myth-making institutions and infects each with the truth that there are gay Americans everywhere.

Albert Wertheim's study of the effects of McCarthyism on the American Theater scene reveal how interpersonal dramas about homosexuality, such as Robert Anderson’s *Tea and Sympathy* (1953) and the revival of Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour* (1952) can be read as both commentaries on the personal-political and as allegorical critique of persecution based on coded ideology: “What of course Hellman realized was that her 1930s play about two women whose careers are ruined by the insinuations of a malicious student had more meaning in 1952 than it had had in 1934.” He also notes how reviewers were very clear in their perceptions of these coded political critiques but also quite oblique in their affirmations of the performances.20

Confessional poets and their exposure of the personal may also be read in political terms, as articulated by Deborah Nelson, who argues that “there is a powerful relationship between the Supreme Court’s fashioning of a right to privacy and the extravagant self-disclosures of the confessional poets.” She finds the “self-consciousness of [poetic] form” influenced by “the structures of privacy,” and vice versa, and argues that privacy should be read not only as a treasured right, but at times as a “deprivation” for those “categories of citizens – women or homosexuals” who were socially and sometimes officially “banished” into the privacy of shame and social isolation.21 For Anne Sexton to question marriage in the poem “Housewife” or for Sylvia Plath to admit to her own discomfort with motherhood in “Morning Song,” or for any of them to publish the vulnerability of an unhappy American psyche in an era promoting national rhetorics of happiness, leisure culture, and success – well, these are all political acts. In her novel *The Bell Jar* (1963), Sylvia Plath’s college-age protagonist understands that her virginity is a cultural commodity in the postwar era. The burden of that knowledge, along with her inability to find a meaningful academic path as a woman, drives her to self-destruction. After recuperating from a suicide attempt, she willfully makes the loss of virginity a project of self-reclamation, and ends the novel relatively happy to be free of the burden. Diane di Prima was making similar decisions in the late 1950s, which she articulates as defiance of her Italian-American and Catholic, patriarchal upbringing, but which can also be read as a rejection of the cultural subject position of women in the era.22
In all these “confessional” examples we see the rejection of a “banishment” to privacy that the culture attempted to enforce.

Throughout the 1950s, then, the relationship between the political and aesthetic realms was complex and varied. Readers might witness an exploration of how Red-baiting infects the workplace and the relationships of the people there, so that the political gets personal. A confessional poet might examine family and his personal psyche. There, the personal becomes political, although in a different way. If we read the books of this era for nuance and gesture, we see that the overtly political are not always clear in their agendas, and the seemingly apolitical are participating in a complicated, multivoiced conversation about American identity during a period of powerful national change.

NOTES

13 See, e.g., Nadel, *Containment Culture*.
20 Wertheim, 215–18.