

## Responses to Literature

1. Why do you think so many immigrant authors write about racial and cultural identity? How does Cofer's work in particular appeal to a broader audience? Find examples from *Silent Dancing* to support your position.
2. Write an essay about your own cultural heritage. Talk to family members about places your ancestors lived and what professions they held. In your essay, discuss how your background affects your identity.
3. Discuss how Cofer treats gender roles in *The Meaning of Consuelo*. How might you react if you were suddenly forced to live in a place with different gender expectations?
4. Judith Ortiz Cofer's works are considered ethnic American literature. Using your library and the Internet, research the criteria for labeling literature in this vein. Choose two authors with whom you are familiar who write multiethnic literature, and describe their works. Compare their themes with those of Cofer's works.

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## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

A recurring theme in Cofer's work is the conflict immigrants have with assimilating into American culture. Here are some other works that focus on cultural identity:

*How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991), by Julia Alvarez. This novel recounts the story of four sisters who must learn to adapt to the American culture of the 1960s when they leave the Dominican Republic for political reasons.

*The Joy Luck Club* (1989), by Amy Tan. The book comprises sixteen stories told by four Chinese immigrant women and their American-born daughters. The title refers to a club formed in China by one of the mothers to sustain its members' spirits during the communist revolution. Tan uses the novel to explore the emotional conflict between Chinese-American mothers and daughters separated by generational and cultural differences.

*Family Installments: Memories of Growing Up Hispanic* (1982), by Edward Rivera. This semi-fictional autobiography describes how the author and his Puerto Rican family deal with moving to New York City and their struggles to find an identity in America.

*Down These Mean Streets* (1976), by Piri Thomas. Thomas, born in New York to a Puerto Rican mother and a Cuban father, is the first Latino to write about growing up in Spanish Harlem. This harsh but honest autobiography is a coming-of-age story that reveals the difficulties Thomas had trying to find his place in society while growing up in Harlem.

## Robert P. Tristram Coffin

BORN: 1892, Brunswick, Maine

DIED: 1955, Portland, Maine

NATIONALITY: American

GENRE: Poetry, fiction, nonfiction

MAJOR WORKS:

*Christchurch* (1924)

*Portrait of an American* (1931)

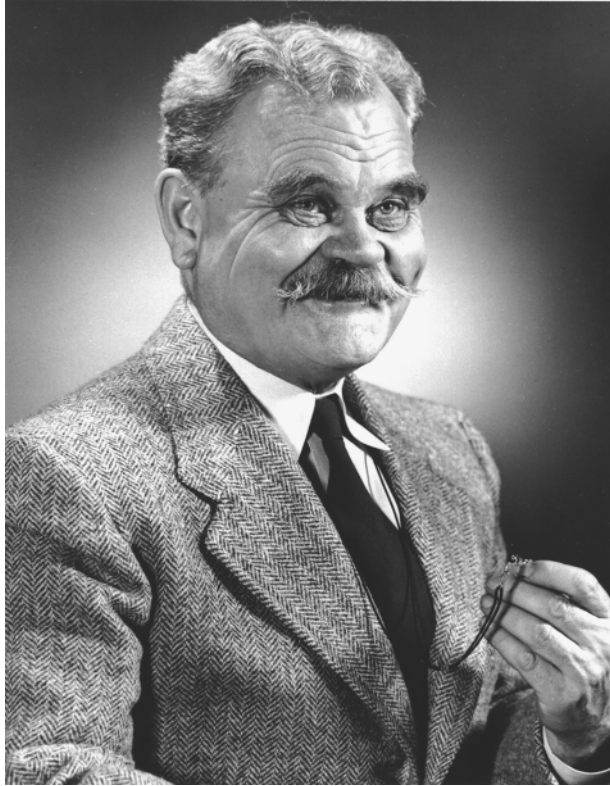
*Ballads of Square-toed Americans* (1933)

*Strange Holiness* (1935)

*Saltwater Farm* (1937)

### Overview

Robert P. Tristram Coffin was one of America's most famous regionalist poets from the 1930s through the 1950s. A talented teacher and artist who often illustrated



Robert P. Tristram Coffin *Coffin, Robert Tristram*, photo by Mel Jenkins. Bowdoin College. Reproduced by permission of Central Missouri State University.

his works, Coffin wrote more than forty books, including novels, essays, and a biography. But he is most noted for his poetry that concerns the old American traditions of Puritan New England—simple values and self-reliance.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

***Born to be a Man of Letters*** Robert Peter Coffin was born on March 18, 1892, in Brunswick, Maine. He grew up in a house near Bowdoin College, an institution with which he would have a relationship with for the rest of his life. His mother, Alice Mary Coombs Coffin, was the second wife of James William Coffin, a Union Army veteran and widower. James Coffin, who raised two families, was a jack-of-all-trades who worked all kinds of jobs. When he died in 1908, he left a skill and a house to each of the ten children from his second marriage.

Coffin's early years were spent on farms far to the south of town. He was educated at home by his parents. Coffin enjoyed listening to his father's songs and stories, and began writing at an early age. His father knew Coffin would be a man of letters, as did poet and neighbor Sarah Orne Jewett, who predicted that Coffin would be a great poet. Coffin unquestioningly accepted this direction, and assumed as his own poetic mark a family name, Tristram.

When he was about thirteen years old, Coffin was sent to school in Brunswick, and according to his father's wishes, entered Bowdoin College in 1911. Coffin was an excellent student and graduated summa cum laude in 1915. The following year, he took his master's degree in English at Princeton on a graduate scholarship. When he was awarded a Rhodes scholarship, he left the United States to study poetry at Trinity College, Oxford. His schooling there was interrupted when America was drawn into World War I and Coffin enlisted as an artillery officer. Like many Americans, his plans were put on hold until after the war. When he was discharged from the army, he returned to Maine and married Ruth Neal Phillip on June 22, 1918.

***Bringing Oxford to Maine*** In just a few years, Coffin returned to Oxford where he was awarded two more degrees in 1920. A year later, he returned to the United States and took a teaching job in Wells College, New York. During his tenure at Wells, Coffin introduced Oxford's teaching style, implementing lectures and private lessons. While teaching, Coffin wrote poems and published his first collection, *Christchurch*, in 1924. These poems share the tales from the religious background of Coffin's New England ancestors, and are regarded as a testament to his Puritan faith.

Coffin continued to publish more poetry, refining his style with each new work. In 1931, he published a biography of his father *Portrait of an American* in which he shares his father's personal experiences, opinions, and spirituality. The respect he had for his father and family continued in his next collection of poetry, *Ballads of Square-toed Americans* (1933). In this book, he presents his father as Beowulf (a classic literary hero), and also recasts the *Aeneid*, the epic poem by Virgil, as an American adventure story in which he takes a panoramic look at America from "John Brown" to the "Mormons" and "Henry Hudson."

In 1934, Coffin left Wells to teach at Bowdoin College, his alma mater. He was named Outstanding Poet of the Nation at the Ninth Annual Poetry Week observances in 1935, and given a gold medal in recognition of his achievement. His next book, *Strange Holiness* (1935) won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1936, and Robert Frost spoke for him at the presentation ceremonies.

***A Poet's Patriotism*** Coffin continued to write verse in a unique manner that was classically New England. Despite his apolitical nature, in the 1930s he unexpectedly found himself hailed as a Republican poet in a country swept by the New Deal. Unfortunately, the few Republicans with whom he was associated were largely people concerned with appearances, and he had very little in common with them. Coffin found the association troubling, as he preferred to remain apolitical.

At the start of World War II, Coffin decided to visit and teach at Indiana University. There Coffin was excited to find himself in the heartland of America, with people he

believed had similar values, thoughts, and experiences as he did. A surge of patriotism poured out in his *Primer for America* (1943), in which he presented the “first lessons in the first principles of being American; the primary stages of the American myth.”

***Fading Into Obscurity*** Coffin’s family survived World War II intact, and his joy spilled over in his mythically titled *People Behave like Ballads* (1946). Some of these poems are hauntingly poignant, while others roar with a hearty humor. However, Coffin’s Puritan patriotism, which featured an increasingly unpopular sense of isolationism, was not well received by many of his colleagues at Bowdoin. His contemporaries considered his ideas outdated, and Coffin began to spend more time lecturing off campus.

At one of these lectures, Coffin was stricken suddenly with a heart attack just before he was scheduled to speak in the chapel of Westbrook Junior College in Portland, Maine. He died in 1955 at the age of sixty three. As proof of how unsympathetic Bowdoin College had become to Coffin’s ideas, the Coffin Room in the college union was dismantled shortly after his death. In addition, the Pierce Chair that he held was filled by someone with markedly different tastes. Macmillan, the publisher that held copyrights on most of his works, did little more than see through the production of *Selected Poems* (1955), the verse that had been most popular with his audiences. The rest fell into a sudden silence. Though Coffin was immensely popular during his lifetime, his name and works fell into obscurity after his death.

### Works in Literary Context

***Epic Puritan Poems*** All Coffin’s work—poetry, essays, fiction, criticism, history, biography, lectures, and drawings—reflects his Puritan perspective. Everything he wrote celebrates life from the biblical creation to the apocalypse.

Coffin is best known for his narratives that celebrate the life of his family and Puritans. He wrote what he saw, learning to use common speech, ordinary people, and usual sights in his verse as did Robert Frost. Coffin captured the essence of New England life and speech very eloquently. He was a learned, authoritative, and consummate assimilator, enriching his own work with refractions of the past. His true role was that of the traditional epic poet who gives living voice to the past in the context of the immediate present.

### Works in Critical Context

Coffin was named Outstanding Poet of the Nation in 1935, won a Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1936, and received the Golden Rose of the New England Poetry Society that same year. He enjoyed fame and popularity during his lifetime. His works appeared in magazines and journals, and he often shared his works at readings.

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Robert Coffin’s famous contemporaries include:

**Robert Frost** (1874–1963): Frost was a major American poet and essayist who explored the meaning of life through his images of nature in rural New England. He won the Pulitzer Prize four times and participated in the inauguration of President John F. Kennedy in January, 1961.

**Alfred Kinsey** (1894–1956): This American zoologist was Coffin’s roommate at Bowdoin. Kinsey founded the Institute for Sex Research at Indiana University. His explorations in human sexuality broke new ground in the field of sex research.

**Edna St. Vincent Millay** (1892–1950): Millay was an American poet popular with the rebellious post-World War I youth. She is remembered for her poetry, which boldly asserted an independent, nonconformist perspective toward contemporary life rarely expressed by women authors of her time.

**Salvador Dali** (1904–1989): This Spanish artist, famous for his paintings of hallucinatory, disturbingly incongruous dreamscapes, made a dramatic impact on modern art.

**Henry Ford** (1863–1947): American industrialist and inventor known for building the Model T automobile. Ford introduced the first assembly line in 1913, and thus revolutionized automobile manufacturing.

Coffin drew on his broad literary education to create a style of classical poetry filled with contemporary themes. He refined his own style of verse that blended history with a modern vision of America. Not all critics embraced his style, however. Many complained his verse was too parochial and homespun. On the other hand, writers such as William Rose Benét called Coffin “our most pictorial poet.”

### ***There Will Be Bread and Love***

Mary M. Colum in her *New York Times* review of *There Will Be Bread and Love* (1942) recognized in Coffin the “breath of the divine afflatus that gives him the rare power of revelation. . . . More than anyone except de la Mare, Coffin can touch people and things with mystery and strangeness.” She sensed, too, his orphic vitalizing capacity: “his animals are always alive.” He was also revered by a more famous poet, Robert Frost, who once said of Coffin, “He may, in time to come, since he will probably outlive me, stand a head taller than I in the world of poetry.”

### Responses to Literature

1. Though Coffin was a popular writer and speaker in his time, he is hardly read today. After reading several of Coffin’s poems, discuss why they may have been

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Many poets, including Coffin, have used the long narrative poem known as the epic. Here are a few famous epic poems:

*The Odyssey* (c. 720 B.C.E.), by Homer. This Greek epic recounts the travels of Odysseus as ten years after the Trojan war, he struggles to sail back to his home of Ithaca.

*Cantar de mio Cid (El Cid)* (c. 1207), author unknown. This Spanish epic poem—the oldest one in Spanish history—is based on the heroic deeds of Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar. Exiled, the Cid wins favor with the king by taking back territory occupied by the Moors in southern Spain.

*Paradise Lost* (1667), by John Milton. Milton's epic poem is considered one of the greatest poems in English.

*Paradise Lost* is an elaborate and detailed account of creation and the fall of man as told in Genesis.

*Hiawatha* (1855), by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. This epic is about the son of the west wind, Hiawatha, who has supernatural powers. Based on selected tribal myths and legends of the North American Indians, the narrative poem recounts the adventures of Hiawatha and how he becomes the leader of his people. Eventually famine and fever kill many of his people. Before Hiawatha heads west, into the sunset, he teaches his people about the white man and his new religion.

lost in obscurity. Do you think his themes are outdated? Support your position using evidence from the texts you have read.

2. Coffin was fond of writing about his relationship with his father. Read "Portrait of an American," the biography of his father that won him an honorary life membership in the National Arts Club. Write a short essay in which you explain why you think Coffin revered his father, and what he hoped Americans would take away from his biography.
3. In common with many other poets from Maine, Coffin wrote about his state's people and character. Using resources in your library and on the Internet, research other Maine poets such as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Edwin Arlington Robinson, Edna St. Vincent Millay and Robert Frost (though Frost was not born in Maine). Choose two or three and analyze how their poems are similar and different in terms of theme, imagery, and tone.
4. Read several poems from *Strange Holiness*. Why do you think this collection won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry? What sets the poems in this collection apart from Coffin's other works?

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## Eugenia Collier

BORN: 1928, Baltimore, Maryland

NATIONALITY: American

GENRE: Fiction, drama, nonfiction

MAJOR WORKS:

"Marigolds" (1969)

*Breeder and Other Stories* (1993)

### Overview

Eugenia Collier is an African American writer and educator best known for her frequently anthologized short story "Marigolds" (1969). Reflecting on her career as an author and critic, she has commented,

The fact of my blackness is the core and center of my creativity. After a conventional Western-type education, I discovered the richness, the diversity, the beauty of my black heritage. This discovery has meant a coalescence of personal and professional goals. It has also meant a lifetime commitment.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Depression-era Childhood** Eugenia Collier was born on April 6, 1928, in Baltimore, Maryland. She is the daughter of Harry Maceo Williams, a physician, and Eugenia Jackson Williams, an educator. The year after Collier was born, the American stock market crashed and sent the country into the Great Depression. Economic hardship was felt across the country and created particular difficulty for already low-income African American neighborhoods