Organized by Danielle Brune Sigler, Assistant Director and Curator for Academic Programs at the Harry Ransom Center, with assistance from Bess Milner, a Plan II undergraduate intern at the Ransom Center.


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For more than 20 years, the battle over obscenity in literature captured the popular imagination and filled the pages of newspapers and magazines. Photographers snapped Upton Sinclair wearing a fig-leaf sandwich board as he sold his banned novel *Oil!* on the streets of Boston. Reporters followed the landmark 1933 trial of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, a case initiated very intentionally when defense attorneys notified the customs bureau precisely where and when to expect the arrival of the book. Critics of the “smuthounds” decried the suppression of artistic freedom in editorial after editorial. John Steinbeck, Radclyffe Hall, Richard Wright, Henry Miller, and a host of other writers came under fire for their exploration of themes and use of language deemed inappropriate by would-be censors. The literary merit of classics such as Giovanni Boccaccio’s *The Decameron* was debated alongside new works like D. H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*. Across the country, writers and publishers struggled to balance artistic integrity with a desire for sales and a real fear of time in prison. Some American writers sought European publishers for their work; others fled the United States altogether.

By the onset of World War II, the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, the New England Watch and Ward Society, the Postal Department, the Treasury Department, and even the Book-of-the-Month Club had irrevocably altered the American cultural landscape.