The portrayal of mental illness in 20th-century American literature provides a unique lens through which society's evolving perceptions and understanding of psychological disorders can be examined. During this period, literature served as both a reflection of prevailing attitudes and a catalyst for challenging stigmas associated with mental health.

At the outset of the century, mental illness was often depicted in literature through exaggerated characters, such as the "mad scientist" or the "unhinged artist," reinforcing stereotypes and emphasizing the Otherness of those suffering from psychological conditions. However, as psychology and psychiatry advanced, authors began to explore the intricacies of mental illness with greater nuance.

F. Scott Fitzgerald's "The Great Gatsby" (1925) subtly alludes to Jay Gatsby's enigmatic behavior, which could be interpreted as a manifestation of his psychological struggles. In the mid-20th century, Sylvia Plath's semi-autobiographical novel "The Bell Jar" (1963) provided a raw and unfiltered look into the protagonist's descent into depression, offering readers a more intimate understanding of mental anguish.

A significant turning point in the portrayal of mental illness can be seen in Ken Kesey's "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" (1962). Set in a mental institution, the novel exposed the oppressive treatment of patients and critiqued the dehumanizing effects of institutionalization. This marked a departure from merely representing madness as eccentricity and delved into the societal systems that exacerbated mental suffering.

By the latter half of the century, literature increasingly aimed to destigmatize mental illness. In "The Catcher in the Rye" (1951) by J.D. Salinger, the troubled protagonist Holden Caulfield's inner turmoil resonated with readers, shedding light on the struggles of adolescents dealing with mental health issues. Similarly, the Pulitzer Prize-winning "The Hours" (1998) by Michael Cunningham interwove three narrative strands, each depicting characters grappling with various forms of mental distress.

In conclusion, the portrayal of mental illness in 20th-century American literature evolved from caricatured stereotypes to nuanced explorations of human psychology and societal influences. Authors navigated a trajectory from reinforcing stigmas to challenging them, contributing to a broader cultural shift in how mental health was perceived and discussed. Through these literary works, readers gained insight into the complexities of the human mind, fostering empathy and understanding for those affected by mental illness.