



# Overview of American Literature

The history of American literature is the literature of American history.

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# Native American Period (pre-1620)

- Oral tradition of song and stories
  - Original authors unknown
  - Written accounts come after colonization
  - Include creation stories, myths, totems
  - archetypes of trickster and conjurer
- Focus:
  - the natural world as sacred
  - Importance of land and place

# Native American Period (pre-1620)

- Several hundred years before the Revolution, the Iroquois Confederation gave the Founding Fathers a model for our future government in *The Iroquois Constitution*.

# Colonial Period (1620-1750)

- Newly arrived colonists create villages and towns and establish new governments while protesting the old ways in Europe
- Did not consider themselves “Americans” until mid-18C
- Enormous displacement of Native-American civilizations

# Colonial Period (1620-1750)

- Literature of the period dominated by the Puritans and their religious influence
  - emphasis is on faith in one's daily life
    - a person's fate is determined by God
    - all are corrupt and need a Savior
  - theocracy--civil authority in Bible and church
  - nature is revelation of God's providence and power
  - Puritan work ethic—belief in hard work and simple, no-frills living

# Colonial Period (1620-1750)

- Writing is utilitarian; writers are amateurs (not professional writers)
- Writing is instructive—sermons, diaries, personal narratives,
- Puritan Plain Style— simple, direct

# Colonial Period (1620-1750)

- Representative authors:
  - William Bradford (journal)
  - Anne Bradstreet (poetry)
  - Jonathan Edwards (sermons)
  - Phillis Wheatley (poetry)
  - John Smith (travelogues)

# Revolutionary Period (1750-1815)

- Writers focused on explaining and justifying the American Revolution
- After the Revolution, this period becomes known as **Early Nationalism**. Writers begin to ponder what it really means to be an American.
- After the War of 1812, which removed the last British troops from North America, there was an even greater focus on nationalism, patriotism, and American identity



# Revolutionary Period (1750-1815)

- Emphasis on reason as opposed to faith alone; rise of empirical science, philosophy, theology
- Shift to a more print-based culture; literacy seen as sign of status
- Instructive in values, highly ornate writing style; highly political and patriotic

# Revolutionary Period (1750-1815)

- Representative authors:
  - Benjamin Franklin (biography, common sense aphorisms)
  - Patrick Henry (speech)
  - Thomas Paine (pamphlet)
  - Thomas Jefferson (political documents)
  - Abigail Adams (letters)

# Romanticism (1800-1865)

- Romanticism is a philosophical reaction to the previous decades in which reason and rational thought dominated
  - Emphasis on universal human experience
  - Valuing feeling and intuition over reason
- Optimistic period of invention, Manifest Destiny, abolition movement, and the “birth” of truly American literature
- Growth of urban population in the Northeast with growth of newspapers, lectures, debates (especially over slavery and women’s roles)
- Revolution in transportation, science,
- Industrial revolution made “old ways” of doing things are now irrelevant

# Romanticism (1800-1865)

- Writers celebrated individualism, nature, imagination, creativity, and emotions.
  - Interest in fantasy and supernatural
  - Writing can usually be interpreted two ways—surface and in depth
  - Writing is didactic—attempting to shape readers
  - Good will triumph over evil.
  - Strong focus on inner feelings
  - Imagination prized over reason; intuition over fact
- Blossoming of short stories, novels, and poetry

# Romanticism (1800-1865)

- **Early Romantic** authors began the tradition of creating imaginative literature that was distinctly American
  - Washington Irving (folktales)
  - William Cullen Bryant (poetry)
  - James Fenimore Cooper (novels)

# Romanticism (1800-1865)

- ▣ **Fireside Poets**, the most popular Romantic poets of the time, were read in the home by the fireside because their poetry contained strong family values, patriotism, etc. It has remained popular in elementary schools for memorization.
  - ▣ Henry Wadsworth Longfellow
  - ▣ Oliver Wendell Holmes
  - ▣ James Russell Lowell
  - ▣ John Greenleaf Whittier

# Romanticism (1800-1865)

- ❑ **Transcendentalism** came to America from Europe
- ❑ Belief that man's nature is inherently good; "divine spark" or "inner-light"
- ❑ Belief that man and society are perfectible (utopia)
- ❑ Stress individualism, self-reliance, intuition
  - ❑ Ralph Waldo Emerson (essays, poetry)
  - ❑ Henry David Thoreau (essays)

# Romanticism (1800-1865)

- ❑ **Dark Romanticism** (also known as **Gothic** or **Anti-Transcendentalism**)
  - ❑ Belief that man's nature is inherently evil
  - ❑ Belief that whatever is wrong with society—sin, pain, evil—has to be fixed by fixing the individual man first.
- ❑ Use of supernatural
- ❑ Strong use of symbolism
- ❑ Dark landscapes, depressed characters
  - ❑ Nathaniel Hawthorne (novels, short stories)
  - ❑ Herman Melville (novels, short stories, poetry)
  - ❑ Edgar Allan Poe (short stories, poetry, literary criticism)



# Realism

## (1850-1900)

- The **Realistic Period**, which includes the Civil War, significant industrial inventions, and extensive westward expansion, is one of the most turbulent and creative in American history.
- Rejection of Romantic view of life as too idealistic
- Writers turn to real life to articulate the tensions and complex events of the time, rather than idealized people or places.
- Seek “verisimilitude” by portraying “a slice of life” as it really is
- Usually objective narrator

# Realism (1850-1900)

- ❑ **Realistic** authors made it their mission to convey the reality of life, however harsh. Characters reflect ordinary people in everyday life, determined yet flawed, struggling to overcome the difficulties of war, family, natural disasters, and human weaknesses.
- ❑ While good will always triumph over evil, it may not happen in every case in this lifetime
- ❑ Nature is a powerful force beyond man's control.
- ❑ Racism persisted beyond slavery—Reconstruction, Jim Crow, KKK, etc.

# Realism (1800-1855)

- ❑ **Transitional writers** which span the Romantic and Realistic Periods express Transcendental ideas in poetry with realistic detail.
- ❑ Experimented with new poetic techniques such as free verse and slant rhyme.
  - ❑ Walt Whitman (poetry)
  - ❑ Emily Dickinson (poetry)

# Realism (1850-1900)

- ▣ **Civil War writers** are primarily concerned with the war, slavery, and to a lesser extent, women's suffrage.
  - ▣ Abraham Lincoln
  - ▣ Robert E. Lee
  - ▣ Mary Chesnut
  - ▣ Sojourner Truth
  - ▣ Harriet Beecher Stowe
  - ▣ John Parker
  - ▣ Frederick Douglass

# Realism (1850-1900)

- ❑ **Local color writers** (also known as **Regionalists**) focused on a particular region of the country, seeking to represent accurately the culture and beliefs of that area.
- ❑ Emphasized accurate portrayals of the physical landscape as well as the habits, occupations, and speech (dialect) of the area's people

# Realism (1850-1900)

- ▣ **Local color** writers include, among others:
  - ▣ Mark Twain (the Mississippi River valley)
  - ▣ Bret Harte (the West, particularly the mining camps of California)
  - ▣ Kate Chopin (the South, particularly Louisiana)
  - ▣ Willa Cather (the Midwest, particularly Nebraska)
  - ▣ Mary Wilkins Freeman (the New England area)

# Realism (1850-1900)

- Mainline realistic authors include several well-known poets
  - Paul Laurence Dunbar
  - Edgar Lee Masters

# Naturalism (1880-1940)

- Realism took a cynical turn to **Naturalism** when literary writers were exposed to the views of three authors whose scientific or political works appeared near the end of the century.
  - Charles Darwin—biological determinism
  - Sigmund Freud—psychological determinism
  - Karl Marx—socio-economic determinism



# Naturalism

## (1880-1940)

- ❑ Naturalistic writers focused on grim reality, observed characters much as scientists might observe laboratory animals, and sought to discover the natural laws which govern human lives.
- ❑ Naturalists viewed nature and the universe as indifferent, even hostile, to man.

# Naturalism

## (1880-1940)

- The universe of the naturalists is godless, cold, and indifferent.
- Life often seems meaningless.
- Fate = chance (no free will)
- The characters in these works are often helpless victims—trapped by nature, the environment, or their own heritage.
  - Jack London (novels, short stories)
  - Stephen Crane (novels, short stories, poetry)
  - Edwin Arlington Robinson (poetry)
  - Ambrose Bierce (short stories)

# Modernism (1900-1950)

- **Modern Period** writers were affected by
  - World War I, World War II, fear of communism, and the beginning of the Cold War
  - Roaring 20's, the Great Depression, commercialism
  - increased population
  - lingering racial tensions after slavery and Reconstruction
  - technological changes
  - rise of the youth culture
  - fear over eroding traditions

# Modernism (1900-1950)

- **Modern writers** are known for
  - themes of alienation and disconnectedness
  - frequent use of irony and understatement
  - experimentation with new literary techniques in fiction and poetry:
    - stream of consciousness
    - interior dialogue
    - fragments
  - trying to create a unique style
  - rise of ethnic and women writers

# Modernism (1900-1950)

- **The Lost Generation** writers were a group of Americans who chose to live in Paris after WWI.
- Their writing explored themes of alienation and change and confronted people's fears, despair, and disillusionment.
  - T. S. Eliot (poetry)
  - F. Scott Fitzgerald (fiction)
  - Ernest Hemingway (fiction)

# Modernism (1900-1950)

- **Imagists** were a subgroup of the Lost Generation that created a new kind of poetry.
- Imagist poetry, which highly resembles Japanese haiku, concentrates on creating a word picture, a snapshot of a moment in time
  - Ezra Pound
  - William Carlos Williams
  - Wallace Stevens

# Modernism (1900-1950)

- Writers in the **Harlem Renaissance** represent a flourishing of African-American authors in a cultural movement that also included music and art
- These writers had two goals
  - to write about the African-American experience
  - to create a body of literature by African-American authors that could rival anything written by anyone else

# Modernism (1900-1950)

- ▣ **Harlem Renaissance** writers included, among others:
  - ▣ Langston Hughes (poetry)
  - ▣ Zora Neale Hurston (fiction)
  - ▣ Claude McKay (poetry)
  - ▣ Countee Cullen (poetry)
  - ▣ Arna Bontemps (poetry)
  - ▣ Helene Johnson (poetry)
  - ▣ James Weldon Johnson (poetry)



# Modernism (1900-1950)

- ▣ **Southern Renaissance** writers follow in the footsteps of the earlier local color writers in their focus on the South.
  - ▣ Katherine Ann Porter
  - ▣ William Faulkner
  - ▣ Flannery O'Connor

# Modernism (1900-1950)

- ▣ **Traditional poets** in the Modern Period include such writers as
  - ▣ Carl Sandburg
  - ▣ Robert Frost
- ▣ **Experimental poets** in the Modern Period include such writers as
  - ▣ e. e. cummings

# Modernism (1900-1950)

## ▣ **Modern dramatists:**

- ▣ Arthur Miller
- ▣ Tennessee Williams

# Postmodernism (1950-present)

- The **Postmodern Period** includes
  - unprecedented prosperity
  - global conflict--Korean War, Vietnam War, the end of the Cold War, the rise of terrorism, Gulf War, 9/11, Iraqi War. War in Afghanistan
  - social protest—the civil rights movement, the women's rights movement, the gay rights movement
  - mass culture and consumerism; media saturation
  - rise of technology and space exploration
  - the digital revolution

# Postmodernism (1950-present)

- The best adjective for this literary period is eclectic—a collection of a little bit of everything.
- Postmodernists create traditional works without traditional structure or narrative.
- The writings have increasingly addressed social issues related to gender and race and youthful rebellion.

# Postmodernism (1950-present)

- ❑ Questioning of “traditional values”—insistence that values are not permanent but only “local” or “historical”; media culture interprets values
- ❑ The writings are often critical and ironic, concentrating on surface realities and the absurdity of daily life.
- ❑ There are no heroes; anti-heroes are common
- ❑ Often detached, unemotional
- ❑ Individuals often seem isolated.

# Postmodernism (1950-present)

- Representative authors:
  - The Beat Poets (pre-hippies, highly intellectual, countered the hidden despair of the 1950s with wildly exuberant language and behavior)—Jack Kerouac, William S. Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg
  - Confessional Poets (used anguish of their own lives to reveal hidden despair)—Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Robert Lowell

# Postmodernism

## 1950-present

- Representative authors
  - J. D. Salinger
  - James Thurber
  - Multicultural literature
    - Jewish—Bernard Malamud, Elie Wiesel
    - African American—Ralph Ellison, Gwendolyn Brooks, Maya Angelou, Alice Walker
    - Native American—N. Scott Momaday, Louise Erdrich
    - Latino-American—Julia Alvarez, Sandra Cisneros
    - Asian-American—Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan



# Postmodernism (1950-present)

- Other representative authors:
  - John Updike
  - Truman Capote
  - Stephen King
  - Joyce Carol Oates

# Major themes in American Literature

## ▣ American individualism

- ▣ Also known as **the self-made man**
- ▣ Celebration of ambition and achievement
- ▣ Original colonists came for religious freedom
- ▣ Later colonists came looking to make their fortune with opportunities not available in class-based European societies.

# Major themes in American Literature

## ▣ **The American Dream**

- ▣ Closely linked to American individualism
- ▣ The idea that anyone can become whatever he or she wants to become through hard work, determination, and perseverance

# Major themes in American Literature

## ▣ **Cultural diversity**

- ▣ A society that welcomes legal immigrants of diverse backgrounds
- ▣ The melting pot theory—Immigrants assimilate into our culture and become Americans
- ▣ The salad bowl theory—immigrants retain their separate identities while making up part of the whole and adopt a hyphenated American name (Chinese-Americans, for example)

# Major themes in American Literature

## ▣ **Tolerance**

- ▣ Religious tolerance was one of the first principles in American life.
- ▣ More recent issues have included race, gender, sexual orientation, etc.