

American Literary Periods

Native American – The dates for this period are very unclear because we have absolutely no idea when they started. Much of the literature of that period were myths, and, of course, the Native Americans still write today. Most of what our text calls Native American myths were written long before Europeans settled in North America.

Puritan – (1472-1750) – Most of this is histories, journals, personal poems, sermons, and diaries. Most of this literature is either utilitarian, very personal, or religious. We call it Puritan because the majority of the writers during this period were strongly influenced by Puritan ideals and values. Jonathan Edwards continues to be recognized from this period.

Enlightenment – (1750-1800) – Called the Enlightenment period due to the influence of science and logic, this period is marked in US literature by political writings. Genres included political documents, speeches, and letters. Benjamin Franklin is typical of this period. There is a lack of emphasis and dependence on the Bible and more use of common sense (logic) and science. There was not a divorce from the Bible but an adding to or expanding of the truths found there.

Romanticism – (1800-1840) - Romanticism was a literary and artistic movement of the nineteenth century that arose in reaction against eighteenth-century Neoclassicism and placed a premium on fancy, imagination, emotion, nature, individuality, and exotica. There's a movement here from personal and political documents to entertaining ones. Purely American topics were introduced such as frontier life. Romantic elements can be found in the works of American writers as diverse as Cooper, Poe, Thoreau, Emerson, Dickinson, Hawthorne, and Melville. Romanticism is particularly evident in the works of the New England Transcendentalists.

Transcendentalism – (1840-1855) -Transcendentalism was an American literary and philosophical movement of the nineteenth century. The Transcendentalists, who were based in New England, believed that intuition and the individual conscience "transcend" experience and thus are better guides to truth than are the senses and logical reason. Influenced by Romanticism, the Transcendentalists respected the individual spirit and the natural world, believing that divinity was present everywhere, in nature and in each person. The Transcendentalists included Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Bronson Alcott, W.H. Channing, Margaret Fuller, and Elizabeth Peabody. The anti-Transcendentalist (Hawthorne and Melville) rebelled against the philosophy that man is basically good. A third group, the Fireside poets, wrote about more practical aspects of life such as dying and patriotism.

Realism – (1865-1915) - Realism is the presentation in art of the details of actual life. Realism was also a literary movement that began during the nineteenth century and stressed the actual as opposed to the imagined or the fanciful. The Realists tried to write truthfully and objectively about ordinary characters in ordinary situations. They reacted against Romanticism, rejecting heroic, adventurous, unusual, or unfamiliar subjects. The Realists, in turn, were followed by the Naturalists, who traced the effects of heredity and environment on people helpless to change their situations. American realism grew from the work of local-color writers such as Bret Harte and Sarah Orne Jewett and is evident in the writings of major figures such as Mark Twain and Henry James.

Naturalism – An outgrowth of Realism, Naturalism was a literary movement among novelists at the end of the nineteenth century and during the early decades of the twentieth century. The Naturalists tended to view people as hapless victims of immutable natural laws. Early exponents of Naturalism included Stephen Crane, Jack London, and Theodore Dreiser.

Regionalism – Another outgrowth of Realism, Regionalism in literature is the tendency among certain authors to write about specific geographical areas. Regional writers like Willa Cather and William Faulkner, present the distinct culture of an area, including its speech, customs, beliefs, and history. Local-color writing may be considered a type of Regionalism, but Regionalists, like the southern writers of the 1920's, usually go beyond mere presentation of cultural idiosyncrasies and attempt, instead, a sophisticated sociological or anthropological treatment of the culture of a region.

Imagism – Imagism was a literary movement that flourished between 1912 and 1927. Led by Ezra Pound and Amy Lowell, the Imagist poets rejected nineteenth-century poetic forms and language. Instead, they wrote short poems that used ordinary language and free verse to create sharp, exact, concentrated pictures.

Modern Age – (1915-1946) – An age of disillusionment and confusion—just look at what was happening in history in the US during these dates—this period brought us perhaps our best writers. The authors during this period raised all the great questions of life...but offered no answers. Faulkner, Steinbeck, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and Frost are all examples.

Harlem Renaissance – Part of the Modern Age, The Harlem Renaissance, which occurred during the 1920's, was a time of African American artistic creativity centered in Harlem, in New York City. Writers of the Harlem Renaissance include Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, Jean Toomer, Langston Hughes, and Arna Bontemps.

Contemporary – (1946-present) – "Literature in the United States today is likewise dazzlingly diverse, exciting, and evolving. New voices have arisen from many quarters, challenging old ideas and adapting literary traditions to suit changing conditions of the national life. Social and economic advances have enabled previously underrepresented groups to express themselves more fully, while technological innovations have created a fast-moving public forum... It is clear that American literature at the turn of the 21st century has become democratic and heterogeneous. Regionalism has flowered, and international, or "global," writers refract U.S. culture through foreign perspectives. Multiethnic writing continues to mine rich veins, and as each ethnic literature matures, it creates its own traditions. Creative nonfiction and memoir have flourished. The short story genre has gained luster, and the "short" short story has taken root. A new generation of playwrights continues the American tradition of exploring current social issues on stage."

(<http://www.america.gov/st/arts-english/2008/May/20080516134208eaifas0.1100885.html#ixzz1GsF6zeSw>)

Postmodernism (a specific type of contemporary literature) - "Postmodernism" suggests fragmentation; collage, hybridity, and the use of various voices, scenes, and identities. Postmodern authors question external structures, whether political, philosophical, or artistic. They tend to distrust the master-narratives of modernist thought, which they see as politically suspect. Instead, they mine popular culture genres, especially science fiction, spy, and detective stories, becoming, in effect, archaeologists of pop culture.

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Other terms to know:

Classicism – Classicism is an approach to literature and the other arts that stresses reason, balance, clarity, ideal beauty, and orderly form in imitation of the arts of ancient Greece and Rome. Classicism is often contrasted with Romanticism, which stresses imagination, emotion, and individualism. Classicism also differs from Realism, which stresses the actual rather than the ideal.

Local Color – Local Color is the use in a literary work of characters and details unique to a particular geographic area. Local color can be created by the use of dialect and by descriptions of customs, clothing, manners, attitudes, scenery, and landscape. Local-color stories were especially popular after the Civil War, bringing readers the West of Bret harte, the Mississippi River of Mark Twain, and the New England of Sarah Orne Jewett.

Gothic – Gothic refers to the use of primitive medieval, wild, or mysterious elements in literature. Gothic elements offended eighteenth-century classical writers but appealed to the Romantic writers who followed them. Gothic novels feature places like mysterious and gloomy castles, where horrifying, supernatural events take place. Their influence on Edgar Allan Poe is evident in "The Fall of the House of Usher."

Grotesque – Grotesque refers to the use of bizarre, absurd, or fantastic elements in literature. The grotesque is generally characterized by distortions or striking incongruities. Grotesque characters, like those in Flannery O'Connor's "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" are characters who have become ludicrous or bizarre through their obsession with an idea or value, or as a result of an emotional problem.

All but "Contemporary" and "Postmodernism" were copied from http://staff.gps.edu/gaither/literary_movements.htm.