



Overview of American Literature

Literary Movements

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.

The Native American Period

(pre-1620)



Native American Period (pre-1620)

- **Oral tradition** of song and stories
 - Original authors unknown
 - Written accounts come after colonization
 - **Includes:** creation stories, myths, totems
 - **Archetypes:** trickster and conjurer
- Focuses on:
 - The natural world as sacred
 - Importance of land and place





Native American Period (pre-1620)

- **Myth** – an anonymous oral story
 - Relies on the supernatural to explore a natural phenomenon, human behavior, or mystery
 - Explain why the world is the way it is/they help make sense of the world





Native American Period (pre-1620)

- Notable Works:

- “The Earth on the Turtle’s Back”
- “When Grizzlies Walked Upright”
- “Grandmother Spider Steals the Sun”
- “Creation by Women”



The Colonial Period

(1620-1750)

Colonial Period (1620-1750)

- When colonists arrived in the new land, they created villages and towns and established new governments (while protesting the old ways in Europe)
 - French, Swedes, Dutch, German, Scots-Irish, Spanish, Africans (mostly slaves)
- Did not consider themselves “Americans” until mid-1700s
- Enormous displacement of Native-American civilizations

Colonial Period (1620-1750)

- Literature of the period was dominated by the **Puritans** and their religious influence
 - Emphasis on faith in one's daily life
 - **Predestination**- A person's fate is determined by God
 - **Original Sin**- All are corrupt and need a Savior
 - **Puritan work ethic**—belief in hard work and simple, no frills living
- **Theocracy**—government ruled by Bible/church



Colonial Period (1620-1750)

- Representative Authors:
 - William Bradford (journal)
 - Anne Bradstreet (poetry)
 - Jonathan Edwards (sermon)
 - Mary Rowlandson (captivity narrative)
 - Phillis Wheatley (poetry)
 - Olaudah Equiano (slave narrative)

Though not written during Puritan times, *The Crucible* by Author Miller & *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne depict life during the time when Puritan theocracy prevailed.

Colonial Period (1620-1750)



Colonial Period (1620-1750)



American Progress
John Gast



Revolutionary Period

(1750-1815)

Revolutionary Period (1750-1815)

- Emphasis on **reason** as opposed to faith alone; this was a **reaction to the Puritan way of life**
- Shift to a more print-based culture; **literacy seen as a 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)

Revolutionary Period (1750-1815)



Revolutionary Period (1750-1815)





Romanticism

(1800-1865)

Romanticism (1800-1865)

- A **reaction to the previous decades** in which reason and rational thought dominated
- Period of invention, Manifest Destiny, abolition movement, and the “birth” of truly American Literature
- Growth of urban population in Northeast
- Growth of newspapers, lectures, debates
- Revolution in transportation and science
- Industrial revolution made “old ways” of doing things irrelevant

Romanticism (1800-1865)

○ Writers celebrated:

- Individualism
- Nature
- Imagination
- Creativity
- Emotions

○ Types of writing:

- Short Stories
- Novels
- Poetry

○ Interest in **fantasy** and **supernatural**

- Writing can be interpreted two ways—
surface and depth

○ Good triumphs over evil

○ **Imagination over reason**

○ **Intuition over fact**

Romanticism (1800-1865)

Early Romantics

Authors began the tradition of creating **imaginative literature** that was **distinctly American**

Authors

- **Washington Irving**
(folktales)
- **William Cullen Bryant**
(poetry)
- **James Fenimore Cooper** (novels)

Romanticism (1800-1865)

Fireside Poets

- The most popular poets of the time were **read in the home by the fireside**
- Poetry contained **strong family values** and **patriotism**
- Taught in elementary schools for memorization

Poets

- Henry Wadsworth Longfellow
- Oliver Wendell Holmes
- James Russell Lowell
- John Greenleaf Whittier

Romanticism (1800-1865)

Transcendentalists

- Hippies of the Romanticism
- Belief that **man's nature is inherently good**; "divine spark" or "inner light"
- Man and society are perfectible (**utopia**)
- Stress **individualism, self-reliance, intuition**

Authors

- **Ralph Waldo Emerson**
(essays, poetry)
- **Henry David Thoreau**
(essays)

Romanticism (1800-1865)

Dark Romantics

- AKA—**Gothic** or Anti-Transcendentalism
- **Man's nature is inherently evil**
- Use of **supernatural**
- Strong use of **symbolism**
- **Dark landscapes, depressed characters**

Poets

- **Nathaniel Hawthorne** (novels, short stories)
- **Herman Melville** (novels, short stories, poetry)
- **Edgar Allan Poe** (short stories, poetry, literary criticism)

Romanticism (1800-1865)





Realism

(1850-1900)

Realism (1850-1900)

- The **Realistic Period** includes the Civil War, significant industrial inventions, and extensive westward expansion
- Rejection of **Romantic view of life as too idealistic**
- Writers **write about real-life issues** and complex events of the time rather than idealized people or places
- **Objective narrator**

Realism (1850-1900)

- Realistic authors 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
- Good **doesn't always triumph** over evil
- Nature is a powerful force beyond man's control
- **Racism** persisted beyond slavery—Reconstruction, Jim Crow, KKK, etc.

Realism (1850-1900)

Transitional Writers

- Transition from Romanticism to Realism
- Express Transcendental ideas in poetry, **with realistic detail**
- Experimented with **new poetic techniques** such as **free verse** and **slant rhyme**

Authors

- **Walt Whitman**
(poetry)
- **Emily Dickinson**
(poetry)

Realism (1850-1900)

Civil War Writers

- Primarily concerned with:
 - The war
 - Slavery
 - Women's suffrage (right to vote)

Authors

- Abraham Lincoln
- Robert E. Lee
- Mary Chesnut
- Sojourner Truth
- Harriet Beecher Stowe
- Frederick Douglass

Realism (1850-1900)

Local Color Writers (Regionalists)

- Focused on a particular region of the country
 - Seeking to represent accurately the culture and beliefs of that area
- Emphasized:
 - Physical landscape
 - Habits
 - Occupations
 - Speech (**dialect**) of the area's people

Authors

- **Mark Twain** (Mississippi River valley)
- **Kate Chopin** (the South, particularly Louisiana)
- **Willa Cather** (the Midwest, particularly Nebraska)



Naturalism

(1880-1940)

Naturalism (1880-1940)

- Realism turned to **Naturalism** when literary writers were exposed to the views of three scientific/political works
 - **Charles Darwin**—biological determinism
 - **Sigmund Freud**—psychological determinism
 - **Karl Marx**—socio-economic determinism

Determinism—the belief that humans cannot be held morally responsible for their actions due to circumstances beyond their control.

Naturalism (1880-1940)

- Focused on grim reality
- Observed characters like scientists observe lab animals
- Viewed nature and the universe as indifferent, even hostile, to man
 - Universe is godless, cold, and indifferent
- Life is meaningless
- Fate=Chance (no free will)
- Characters are helpless victims—trapped by nature, the environment, or their own heritage

Naturalism (1880-1940)

- **Jack London**
(novels, short stories)

- **Stephen Crane**
(novels, short stories, poetry)

- **Edwin Arlington Robinson** (poetry)

- **Ambrose Bierce**
(short stories)



Modernism

(1900-1950)

Modernism (1900-1950)

- Writers affected by:
 - World War I, World War II, fear of communism, beginning of the Cold War
 - Roaring 20s, the Great Depression, commercialism
 - Increased population from immigration
 - Lingering racial tensions
 - Technological changes
 - Fear of 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**
 - Creating a unique style
 - Rise of **ethnic female** writers

Modernism (1900-1950)

The Lost Generation

- A group of writers who chose to live in Paris after WWI
- Themes of alienation and change
- Confronted people's fears, despair, and disillusionment

Writers

- **T.S. Eliot** (poetry)
- **F. Scott Fitzgerald** (fiction)
- **Ernest Hemingway** (fiction)

Modernism (1900-1950)

Harlem Renaissance

- Flourishing of **African-American authors**
- Included **music** and **art**
- Two goals:
 - Write about **African-American experience**
 - Create literature by African-Americans that could **rival anything created by anyone else**

Writers

- **Langston Hughes**
(poetry)
- **Zora Neale Hurston**
(fiction)
- **Claude McKay**
(poetry)

Modernism (1900-1950)

Southern Renaissance

- Follow in the footsteps of earlier **local color** writers, in that they focus on the South

Writers

- **Margaret Mitchell**
- **William Faulkner**
- **Flannery O'Connor**

Modernism (1900-1950)

Traditional Poets

Carl Sandburg

Robert Frost

Experimental Poets

e.e. cummings

Modern dramatists

Arthur Miller

Tennessee Williams



Postmodernism

(1950-present)

Postmodernism (1950-present)

- **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)

- **Eclectic**—a collection of a little bit of everything
- Create traditional works without traditional structure
- **Address social issues** related to gender/race/youthful rebellion
- Questions **traditional values**
- Often **critical** and **ironic**
- No heroes/anti-heroes are common
- Detached, unemotional
- Individuals are **isolated**

Postmodernism (1950-present)

The Beat Poets

- **Pre-hippies**, highly intellectual, 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)

American Authors

- J.D. Salinger
- James Thurber
- John Updike
- Truman Capote
- Stephen King
- Joyce Carol Oates

Multicultural Literature

- **Jewish**
 - Elie Wiesel
- **African-American**
 - Ralph Ellison, Maya Angelou, Alice Walker
- **Latino-American**
 - Julia Alvarez, Sandra Cisneros
- **Asian-American**
 - Amy Tan, Maxine Hong Kingston