Overview of American Literature

Literary Movements

OAmerican 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.

OThe 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

OCultural 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)

O<u>Tolerance</u>

- **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)

OMyth – 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)

Historical Context

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

Historical Context

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
 - **OPredestination-** 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

OTheocracy—government ruled by Bible/church

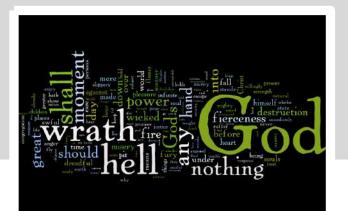


Characteristics

Colonial Period (1620-1750)

Types of Writing

SermonsDiariesPersonal Narratives



Writing Style

Writing is Utilitariannot professional writers

• Writing in **instructive**

OPuritan Plain StyleO Simple and direct

Colonial Period (1620-1750)

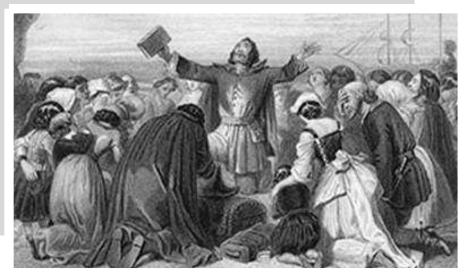
Representative Authors:
William Bradford (journal)
Anne Bradstreet (poetry)
Jonathan Edwards (sermon)
Mary Rowlandson (captivity narrative)
Phillis Wheatley (poetry)
Olaudah Equiano (slave narrative)

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)







Art

Colonial Period (1620-1750)



American Progress John Gast



Revolutionary Period (1750-1815)

Historical Context

COMMON SENSE, THE RIGHTS OF MAN,

THOMAS PAINE

date House

Revolutionary Period (1750-1815)

- Occurred during/after the Revolutionary War
- Writers focused on explaining and justifying the American Revolution
- Writers pondered what it really means to be an American

 After the War of 1812 (when last British troops were removed from North America) there was an even greater focus on nationalism, patriotism, and American Identity

Characteristics

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: OBenjamin Franklin (biography, common sense aphorisms) • Patrick Henry (speech) • Thomas Paine (pamphlet) OThomas Jefferson (political) documents) • Abigail Adams (letters)

Art

Revolutionary Period (1750-1815)



Revolutionary Period (1750-1815)



Romanticism

(1800-1865)

Historical Context

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

Characteristics

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 Greanleaf 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, selfreliance, intuition

Authors

• Ralph Waldo Emerson (essays, poetry)

OHenry 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)

Characteristics/Authors

Romanticism (1800-1865)



Realism

(1850-1900)

Historical Context

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

Characteristics

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.

Characteristics/Authors

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

OWalt Whitman (poetry)
OEmily Dickinson (poetry)

Characteristics/Authors

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

Characteristics/Authors

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)

O Willa Cather (the Midwest, particularly Nebraska)

Naturalism

(1880-1940)

Historical Context

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.

Characteristics

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

Important Authors

Naturalism (1880-1940)

• Jack London (novels, short stories)

• Stephen Crane (novels, short stories, poetry) OEdwin Arlington
Robinson (poetry)

• Ambrose Bierce (short stories)

Modernism

(1900-1950)

Historical Context

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

Characteristics

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 OStream of consciousness OInterior dialogue **O**Fragments Ocreating 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

OT.S. Eliot (poetry)

OF. Scott Fitzgerald (fiction)

OErnest 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

O Langston Hughes (poetry)

• Zora Neale Hurston (fiction)

O Claude McKay (poetru)

Modernism (1900-1950)

Southern Renaissance

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

OMargaret Mitchell

OWilliam Faulkner

OFlannery 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)

Historical Context

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 Afganistan

o 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

Characteristics

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**

Popular Authors

Postmodernism (1950-present)

The Beat Poets

Pre-hippies, highly intellectual, exuberant language and behavior
 Jack Kerouac
 William S. Burroughs
 Allen Ginsberg

Confessional Poets

OUsed anguish of their own lives to reveal hidden despair
 O Sylvia Plath O Anne Sexton O Robert Lowell

Popular Authors

Postmodernism (1950-present)

American Authors

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

Multicultural Literature

O Jewish

• Elie Wiesel

• African-American

 Ralph Ellison, Maya Angelou, Alice Walker

O Latino-American

- Julia Alvarez, Sandra Cisneros
- Asian-American
 - Amy Tan, Maxine Hong Kingston