



# Realism in American Literature 1865-1914

# Lecture Objectives

- ▶ To gain an overview of the historical context and literary concerns of Realism

# American Literature



The  
Puritan  
Era



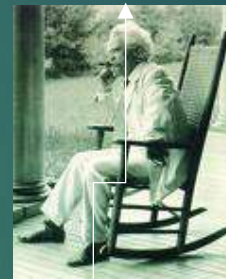
Age of  
Reason



Romanticism



Transcendentalism



Realism



Modernism



Contemporary and  
Post-Modern Period



1600 - 1750

1750-1800

1800-1840

1840-1855

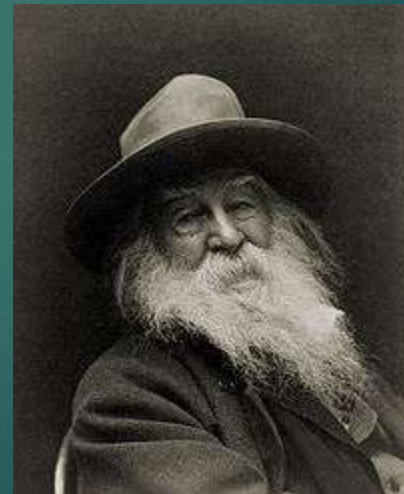
1865-1915

1916-1946

1946 – Present

# The Civil War

- ▶ A nation divided
- ▶ Interrupts Transcendentalism
- ▶ Walt Whitman
  - ▶ Transition writer: late Transcendental poet, early Realist
  - ▶ *Leaves of Grass*
  - ▶ “O Captain, My Captain”



# Historical Context

- ▶ Population of the United States is growing rapidly. (1865 -1915)
- ▶ Science, industry and transportation are expanding.
- ▶ Literature also was growing, but most new writers were not Romantics or Transcendentalists. They are Realists.
- ▶ The “Frontier” did not exist as before; its legacy changed and impacted Realists in its new form.
- ▶ The aftermath of the Civil War meant that Americans were less certain and optimistic about the future.
- ▶ The idealism of the Romantics and philosophy of Transcendentalists seemed out of date and irrelevant to many readers.

# Realism vs. Romanticism



“The trapper was placed on a rude seat which had been made with studied care...His body was placed so as to let the light of the setting sun fall full upon the solemn features. His head was bare, the long thin locks of gray fluttering lightly in the evening breeze. ”

He was most fifty and he looked it. His hair was long and tangled and greasy, and you could see his eyes shining through...there warn't no color in his face; it was white...a white to make a body sick...a tree-toad white, a fish belly white. As for his clothes, just rags, that's all.



# Realism in American Literature

- ▶ The purpose of the writing is “to instruct and entertain”
- ▶ Character is more important than plot.
- ▶ Subject matter is drawn from real life experience.
- ▶ The realists reject symbolism and romanticizing of subjects.
- ▶ Settings are usually those familiar to the author.
- ▶ Plots emphasized “the norm of daily experience”
- ▶ Ordinary characters

# Some Writers from Realism

- ▶ Stephen Crane
  - ▶ The Red Badge of Courage
- ▶ Willa Cather
  - ▶ O Pioneers!
  - ▶ My Antonia
- ▶ Bret Harte “Outcasts of Poker Flats”
- ▶ Jack London
  - ▶ The Call of the Wild
- ▶ Kate Chopin!
  - ▶ Story of an Hour
- ▶ Mark Twain
  - ▶ Life on the Mississippi
  - ▶ The Adventures of Tom Sawyer
  - ▶ The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn



# Literary Style and Concerns

- ▶ Uniformity and diversity
- ▶ Capturing the commonplace
- ▶ Writing in vernacular and local dialect
- ▶ Local stories
- ▶ Nature again
  - ▶ Yes, its beauty, but also its hardship and how it wears the human spirit down

# Mark Twain

- ▶ Born as Samuel Longhorn Clemens, November 30th, 1835 in Missouri.
- ▶ Traveled throughout the United States during his adult life, including to California and Europe.
- ▶ Much of his writing stemmed from his travel and boyhood experiences.
- ▶ Was well known for his sense of humor and his satirical writing style.
- ▶ Died in 1910

# Some Mark Twain Quotes:

- ▶ A man who carries a cat by the tail learns something he can learn in no other way.
- ▶ Age is an issue of mind over matter. If you don't mind, it doesn't matter
- ▶ Classic: A book which people praise and don't read.
- ▶ Don't let schooling interfere with your education.
- ▶ Few things are harder to put up with than the annoyance of a good example.

# Mark Twain on slavery and Huckleberry Finn

- ▶ In those old slave-holding days the whole community was agreed as to one thing:...the sacredness of slave property. To help steal a horse or a cow was a low crime, but to help a hunted slave...or hesitate to promptly betray him to the slave-catcher ... was a much baser crime, & carried with it a stain, a moral smirch which nothing could wipe away. That this sentiment should exist among slave-owners is comprehensible--there were good commercial reasons for it--but that it should exist & did exist among the paupers, the loafers the tag-rag & bobtail of the community, & in a passionate & uncompromising form, is not in our remote day realizable. It seemed natural enough to me then; natural enough that Huck & his father the worthless loafer should feel it & approve it, though it seems now absurd.

It shows that that strange thing, the conscience--the unerring monitor--can be trained to approve any wild thing you want it to approve if you begin its education early & stick to it.