

PART I : Early 19th Century American literature - The American Renaissance

Introduction

The American Renaissance was the title of a 1941 book by the critic F.O. Matthiessen on the amazing achievements of American authors of the 1840s and '50s. (See the chronology on pages 591-3 of the *Bedford Anthology* for a list of some of their works.) In these works such as *The Scarlet Letter*, *Moby Dick*, *Walden*, and *Leaves of Grass*, Hawthorne, Melville, Thoreau, and Whitman showed little influence from English forbearers. They chose American materials and handled them in unprecedented new ways. Consciously (in the case of Thoreau and Whitman), they had picked up Emerson's challenge to learn not from the "courtly muses of Europe" but directly from nature, the past, and action. And while less influenced by Emerson, indeed, by in some ways rebelling against him, Hawthorne and Melville also followed their own independent geniuses. Hawthorne spent years reading and absorbing early New England history, and spending his summers exploring its countryside. His imaginative treatments of this material were the basis of his "tales," or what we now call his short stories, and his classic novels, *The Scarlet Letter* and the *House of Seven Gables*. Melville's whaling voyage to the Pacific gave him the material for his early fictionalized travel books, *Typee* and *Omoo* and later *Moby Dick*, the first great American novel.

But the American Renaissance was marked by much more than the achievements of Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Hawthorne, and Melville. The growing anti-slavery movement resulted in the publication of over a hundred book-length autobiographies and biographies of escaped slaves, as well as a thousand shorter accounts in magazines and newspapers. These stories of the many horrors of slavery, of rebellion, escape, and eventual freedom were, it can be argued, the most completely original American literary form, for no other country was so divided by race and region. Harriet Beecher Stowe drew on them and on her own observations while living in Cincinnati, just across the Ohio River from Kentucky, in writing *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the first great American best-seller and, as Lincoln later told its author, the book that started the Civil War.

As noted in the *Anthology* Overview (pp. 607-18) other reform movements, notably Women's Suffrage and the early Labor Movement, led to further literary development. Stowe's sister Catherine Beecher was an advocate for women's right to work. Margaret Fuller was an advocate for women's intellectual freedom and equality. Rebecca Harding Davis's "Life in the Iron Mills" was a powerful protest against dreary and demeaning factory life, as was Herman Melville's story, "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids."

Not all the literature of this period was focused on reform, however. As explained in the *Anthology* Introduction on "Technology, Transportation, and the Growth of the Literary Marketplace" (pp. 594-97), there were also great improvements in printing and distribution that led to many more newspapers and magazines, with much larger and wider circulations that in turn created a larger reading public and more writers of popular poetry and fiction. Two of the most famous writers were Edgar Allan Poe and Fanny Fern. Poe was himself a brilliant magazine editor with a keen sense of what would appeal to a mass audience, and the result, in his own writing, were tales of suspense and fantasy that made him a founder of what we now call the detective story and science fiction. He also attempted to define the short story, writing that it should be readable in one sitting and be carefully designed to have the unity and intensity of effect of a lyric poem. Fanny Fern's fame did not last so well, although she was once the best paid writer in the country. A writer of popular newspaper columns and popular novels, she was one of the women Hawthorne called a "damned mob of scribbling women" and who were later scorned by male (and female) critics as conventional and sentimental. (Her flowery name, a pen name, did not help.) But contemporary critics have realized that she was actually very witty, colorful, and outspoken.

Emily Dickinson is, in many respects, the most distinctive of all these writers. Though her poems are the antithesis of Whitman's in form and point of view, they are fully as original. They are also equally different from the popular poetry of the period, as the student can see by looking at the selections in the *Anthology* under "The American Muse: Poetry at Midcentury," (pp. 1202-1235). They too are a part of this miraculous period.

Readings

Introductions, pp. 607-18
Margaret Fuller, pp. 725-33
Harriet Beecher Stowe, pp. 747-52
Harriet Jacobs, pp. 763-68
Henry David Thoreau, 792-854
Frederick Douglass, pp. 855-922

[173 pp.]

Nathaniel Hawthorne, pp. 966-1017
Edgar Allen Poe, pp. 1018-9, 1030-43
Fanny Fern, pp. 1062-1071
Herman Melville, 1072-1118
Rebecca Harding Davis, pp. 1149-1177

[161 pp.]

Walt Whitman, pp. 1236-1313
Emily Dickinson, pp. 1314-1346

[100 pp.]

Questions

One of the subjects in the writing of the American Renaissance that was comparatively new to world literature was the subject of work. Previously, most great literature was about love, war, religion, statecraft, and related subjects of morals and manners. Not so in American slave narratives and in the novels and stories of Herman Melville and Harriet Beecher Stowe, Rebecca Harding Davis's "Life in the Iron-Mills" and the poems of Walt Whitman. Describe the many kinds of work that these writers write about and their many different attitudes towards it. Why is writing about work an important subject in America?

Thoreau's essay, "Resistance to Civil Government," and Melville's short story, "Bartleby, the Scrivener," illustrate not only radically different forms of protest but also radically different faces of the romantic movement in America. Compare and contrast them and explain why they are both romantic.

Contrast the poems of Emily Dickinson with the prose writings of the other women read in this section of the course. What does Dickinson have in common with them? How is she also different?

Late 19th Century American Literature : American Realism

Introduction

As explained in the “Introduction” to the second volume of the *Bedford Anthology*, the Civil War brought tremendous change to the United States. Not only were the slaves now nominally free, the South was now defeated and the North free to proceed to expand its capitalist-industrial might. Transcontinental railroads were built. The West was further explored and settled. Immigrants began to come in ever-increasing numbers. Enormous new fortunes were made, creating a huge gap between the very rich and the millions of farmers, miners, and laborers who worked in the new factories and laid the track for the new railroads. At the same time, many other Americans reached new levels of middle class success and prosperity, with leisure in which to read and travel.

All these changes and developments are reflected in the new literature of this period, roughly the fifty years from the end of the Civil War to the beginning of World War I. But literature does more than reflect historical events. It attempts to reflect the changes in people and their surroundings – in nature and society and the character and beliefs of individuals – that cause and are caused by the historical events. This is especially so of the literature of this period, known in literary histories and anthologies as the Age of Realism. The pre-Civil War writers are called romantic because they wished to inspire themselves and their readers to higher, nobler lives, like Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman, or to show extremes of heroism, introspection, suffering, isolation, and horror, like Hawthorne, Melville, and Poe. Realists, to use a figure of the French realistic novelist Stendhal, wanted their novels to be like a mirror carried down a highway, reflecting everything from the sky above to the dirt and puddles below. American realists, at least initially, showed less of the dirt and puddles than did their European contemporaries. As William Dean Howells wrote, “our novelists concern themselves with the more smiling aspects of life.” Their audience and subject matter was generally the middle and upper middle class. But they nevertheless wanted, in another famous phrase, to show life as it is in the world that is.

A good example of an American realistic novel of the 1870s is Henry James’s *Daisy Miller*. Daisy is an upper-middleclass American girl traveling in Europe with her mother and little brother, while her father is back in Schenectady making money. She is independent, curious and high-spirited, reflecting the confidence and optimism of her country, while her little brother Randolph is bored with Europe and thinks everything American is better – which also reflects some Americans’ attitudes. The crisis comes when Daisy takes up with an Italian man in Rome and refuses to abide by the cautions given her by elders. The novel was James’s first big popular success, creating quite a controversy over whether Daisy was or was not a reliable portrait of the new American girl.

Mark Twain’s greatest novel is *Huckleberry Finn*, which is unforgettable for its poetic descriptions of the Mississippi River and the life on its shores in small towns and plantations in the decades before the Civil War, all as seen through the eyes of a poor and barely schooled, but very observant boy. *Old Times on the Mississippi* is an interesting companion to it because it has the same setting but is autobiographical. Moreover, Twain’s account of the differences between a passenger’s and a pilot’s views of the river are almost an essay on the differences between romantic and realistic writing, as he saw them. However, a reader should not be misled by the words “realism” and “realistic.” James’s clever short story, “The Real Thing,” can also be read as a kind of critical essay, subtly making the point that art and reality are still and always decidedly different.

“A New England Nun” and the short stories and poetry assigned in Week 8 introduce two other schools or types of writing in this very productive and contentious period, regionalism and naturalism. Sometimes treated as evolutions of realism, sometimes as distinctly different, they are fascinating to compare. Regionalism, as the name suggests, is rooted in place. It evokes the character of a small town or countryside and how it has become a powerful force in the values and behavior of the residents. Louisa Ellis’s 15-year engagement to Joe Dagget, while he has been in Australia seeking his fortune, has given her the opportunity to become deeply and happily habituated to her single life. Her garden, her house, her daily rituals and tastes in food and clothing all suit her perfectly and give her calm and tact and dignity. Marriage would destroy them. Similarly, Sylvia in “A White Heron” has identified with the heron and the other birds of the ponds and woods around her grandmother’s farm. Both of these stories, and other regionalist fiction, show that by this time New Englanders like Mary Wilkins Freeman and Sarah Orne Jewett had developed a sense of place comparable to that of the Native Americans whose tales were read earlier. But there is also something universal to these stories. Though they celebrate the manners and values of rural Massachusetts and Maine, they are not just about those places.

A different image of New England emerges in Edward Arlington Robinson’s poems. His characters like Richard Cory and Miniver Cheevy are also solitary and, in their way, independent. The difference is that they are lonely and desperate. Life has passed them by, as it had by that time also deserted the little towns and villages of New England. They are victims of time or fate or just their own habits and illusions, which illustrates a primary

condition of the characters in literary naturalism. Where the major characters in realistic writing are roughly equal to or reflective of their surroundings, and the major characters in regionalism are embodiments of them, the characters in naturalistic literature are inferior to their surroundings. They have been or are being overcome by it and so are usually the victims of it. Robinson might be called both a regionalist and naturalist.

The stories by Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, Theodore Dreiser, and Jack London are examples of a purer American naturalism, but with some interesting additions. Crane's "The Open Boat," is based on his own experience, after a shipwreck off the coast of Florida, a condition in which the ocean is vastly superior in power to the four men. Some have greater strength and experience than others, but that makes little difference. Survival is mostly a matter of luck. Frank Norris's "A Deal in Wheat," however, introduces two levels of character: Sam Lewiston, the Kansas wheat farmer who is a helpless victim of the fluctuations of the market, and the two speculators, Hornung and Truslow, who compete with each other to make enormous sums of money by manipulating prices. They are two supermen, as superior to poor Lewiston as the ocean was to Crane's four sailors. Hornung, by his clever deception, finally outdoes Truslow, but both go on, as Norris says, "jovial, contented, enthroned, and unassailable." As manipulators of the price of wheat, the staff of life, they are, in a perverse way, superior to nature. The figure of a Nietzschean superman intrigued and even obsessed naturalists like Norris, Dreiser, and London. They sought, to use the title of London's short story, "The Law of Life." Dreiser later wrote two novels, *The Financier* and *The Titan* based on the life of the millionaire Charles T. Yerkes, who built the Chicago Loop. If "nature" was a force to which most creatures were inferior, then there must be a few who by embodying nature are the superiors of all others.

The readings in Week 9 are autobiographical writing by contemporaries of the authors of realism, regionalism, and naturalism that does not easily fit into any of these styles. They demonstrate, for one thing, how no single literary or artistic style ever dominates an era. Further, they, along with the stories of Kate Chopin, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and other feminists, demonstrate how the issues of race, gender, ethnicity, and immigration took new form and continued to trouble the country. Is the United States a "Melting Pot," as illustrated in Israel Zangwill's popular play of 1908? Or is it "a salad," where different ingredients toss against one another but never break down? Or is it something else?

Readings

Introduction, pp. 2-39
Howells, pp. 51-4
Mark Twain, "Jim Smiley and his Jumping Frog," pp. 61-7
 "Old Times on the Mississippi," 71-93
Ambrose Bierce, pp. 122-29
Henry James, from "The Art of Fiction," pp. 47-9
 Daisy Miller, pp. 130-73
 "The Real Thing," pp. 173-93
Sarah Orne Jewett, "A White Heron," pp. 193-202
Mary Wilkins Freeman, "A New England Nun," pp. 202-13

Kate Chopin, "At the Cadian Ball" and "The Storm...," pp. 213-42
Pauline E. Hopkins, "As the Lord Lives,..." pp. 241-50
Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "The Yellow Wall-Paper," pp. 251-65
Edith Wharton, "The Other Two," pp. 279-95
Sui Sin Far, "In the Land of the Free," pp. 296-305
Mary Austin, "The Basket Maker," pp. 305-13
Edward Arlington Robinson, poems, pp. 313-23
Frank Norris, "A Deal in Wheat," pp. 323-33
Stephen Crane, "The Open Boat," pp. 334-53
Theodore Dreiser, "Butcher Rogaum's Door," pp. 359-72
Paul Lawrence Dunbar, poems, pp. 372-78
Willa Cather, "A Wagner Matinee," pp. 378-87
Jack London, "The Law of Life," pp. 388-94

"Writing 'American' Lives," pp. 397-497 (Jose Marti, Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins, Zitkala-Sa, Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, Henry Adams, Mary Antin)

Questions

Regional writing is sometimes treated as inferior. Do you think it is or is not? Answer by comparing two regional stories with three other assigned stories in this unit. What are your ultimate criteria for successful and important fiction?

The autobiographical writings assigned in Week 9 are all concerned with the complexities of race and ethnicity in America, whereas the fiction assigned in Weeks 7 and 8 is often concerned with social and economic class. Why is this? Is an author more inclined to be personal and refer to his or her own experience when writing about gender and race? Is class a more subtle subject that is better treated in fiction? Or are there other reasons? Discuss these issues as they appear in two or more works of each kind.

Many of the readings in this unit are protests against the social and economic conditions of the period. But it is often said that "protest literature" is not real literature – that it is simplistic, shrill, didactic, and has limited appeal. Is this true of some of the things you have read? If so, which ones? Are there other stories and poems which do make social criticisms and protests but which are also better literature – better written, more entertaining and instructive and with a greater human appeal? Discuss at least five works.