

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

NORTH AMERICAN LITERATURE

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Overview North American literature was deeply linked to religious belief systems and then, the experience of the Europeans who found themselves in a land of unexpected complexity. For that reason, although much of the early literature of North American writers could be considered imitative of European forms, the content and underpinning philosophical and psychological realities are quite different. In the 19th century, North American literature began to further differentiate itself from the counterparts in Europe, with uniquely American themes, forms, and approaches. In the twentieth-century, North American literature struck out on multiple fronts to explore, sometimes simultaneously, modernism, realism, surrealism, postmodernism and more.

PreHistory

Clovis culture (18,000 – 8,000 BC): There was no literature as we would know it today, although there were signs of the existence of narratives, oral traditions, and religious practices as evidenced in petroglyphs, cave carvings, and geoglyphs (large earthwork design in the desert southwest).

Classical

Southwest Pueblo (1200 BCE – 1300 AC): There were no written books, scrolls, or codices. However, there was a tradition of sand paintings that told stories. They constituted a type of literature, but it would be more accurate to ascribe them to scripts and oral narrative / folklore.

Eastern Woodlands (1000 BCE – 1000 AD): Among the civilizations of the Eastern Woodlands, there were no codices or written texts. However, there was a system of communication via wampum, which were patterns in beads. This concept extends the idea of literature – it's more realistically a kind of script.

Colonial (Early Modern)

Puritans and Pilgrims: The Puritans were perhaps the most well-represented of the religious writers in Colonial America. The Puritans wrote extensive essays, sermons, and at times poems. John Winthrop, who was the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony wrote a number of sermons and essays that expounded the goals and purposes of the Great Migration to New England in the 1630s and 1640s. William Bradford's *Of Plymouth Plantation*, which was a detailed journal of the experience of the Pilgrim colonists from 1621 to 1646. While it was an autobiographical account, it also contains literary and Biblical allusions. Cotton Mather, a grandson of the Massachusetts Bay Colony founders, wrote more than 450 essays and sermons on a number of topics ranging from natural science to ethics and Biblical exegesis. Unfortunately, Cotton Mather is remembered for his leading role in the Salem witch trials. Ann Bradstreet was the first published poet who was widely acknowledged in England. Her forms were Elizabethan, and she wrote of being a mother, wife, and general observer of life in the colonies. Michael Wigglesworth was one of the first to put the philosophical concepts that informed the Puritans (the apocalyptic narrative, the "jeremiad") into verse form. His "Day of Doom" is a long poem that explores the mindset of the Puritans, the "true believers" who would be the only ones spared at the Day of Judgement and the God's destruction of the world and the unbelievers. The first American satire, *The Sotweed Factor* was written by Ebenezer Cooke in 1708. It is a poem written in couplets that responds to the greed and "get rich quick" schemes that inspired many people to settle in America and also to strike up trade with the settlers and the Native Americans. The "Sot-weed Factor" is a tobacco merchant. In the end, his schemes and dreams come to naught as he is swindled by a lawyer.

Slave Narrative: Phillis Wheatley wrote a remarkable and very valuable narrative of her experiences as woman born in West Africa, then sold to a slave trader who transported her to Boston. She took her name from the slave ship in which she traveled, *The Phillis*. The Wheatley family purchased her to be a servant, and she was taught to read and write by Mary Wheatley, the daughter of the family. By the age of 12, Phillis was reading Greek and Latin classics and by 14 she wrote her first poem. Wheatley's poetry reflected classical themes, but it also incorporated

West African philosophies into poems that honor events, people, and Christianity. In particular, she incorporates a veneration of the solar gods and West African sun worship.

Personal narratives: Benjamin Franklin was a very influential presence in pre-Revolutionary and post-Revolutionary America. His *Poor Richard's Almanack* and many other personal writings were aphoristic, salutatory, and positive. Thomas Paine authored influential pamphlets, "Common Sense" and "The American Crisis," which were instrumental in uniting people in a common cause and inspiring a breakaway from Britain.

Nineteenth Century

Transcendentalism: The essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson united the "common sense" heritage of Thomas Paine with Asian notions from Buddhism and Hinduism, with German Romanticism. The result encouraged free thinking and creative self expression, as well as an emphasis on self-determination and action. Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* championed the idea of simplicity, connections to nature, and the abolition of slavery. Walt Whitman's poetry shocked people with its directness and formal innovations, in which he brought together a kind of Zoroastrian energy of fire and electricity, united with the flesh and blood of humanity. All the authors emphasized the capacity of humanity to transcend and build a new kind of person and a new kind of community.

Diaries / Non-Fiction: Alexis De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* explored the potential of America in very positive ways. However, Jean de Crevecoeur's *What Is an American?* Reflected a deep disenchantment. Frederick Douglass was born a slave, and had the blessed fortune to be taught to read and write, despite the extreme risk of such an endeavor. His personal narrative describes how he learned to write and it contains an exploration of the culture of the time and the mindset that allowed the cruel institution of slavery to exist and thrive. Mary Rowlandson's narrative of being captured by Indians was written much earlier, in 1682, but was popularized in the 19th century.

Romanticism: German Romanticism manifested itself in many ways in American literature, but in the fertile literary imaginations of the Americans, it took a very different direction. Washington Irving incorporated Dutch history and ghost stories in his *Tales of Sleepy Hollow* and *Rip Van Winkle*. Nathaniel Hawthorne incorporated haunted houses in *The House of the Seven Gables*, and Puritan dark tragic romance in *The Scarlet Letter*. Edgar Allan Poe's essays explore the idea that there should always be undercurrents that potentially contradict the notions on the surface. His own work clearly reflects that, as the dark explorations of extremes of obsession and twisted psyches manifest themselves in his *Tales*. He was credited as writing the first detective novel in America, and his poetry, although verging on doggerel, is also an exploration into obsession and death.

West / Frontier: Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain) wrote fiction and essays about the Frontier, starting with the Mississippi River (*Life on the Mississippi*) and going toward the Nevada and California gold fields (*Roughing It*). He even wrote about Hawaii and other areas. His *Tom Sawyer* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, although politically incorrect today, accurately reflect the social milieu at the time.

Social Novels and Pioneers: Henry James wrote novels including *The Golden Bowl* having to do with the class structure and the cultural values of the elite. Similarly, Edith Wharton critiqued the life of the American aristocracy (which she experience first-hand) in novels such as *The House of Mirth* and *The Age of Innocence*. Authors who wrote novels having to do with pioneers included Willa Cather's *My Antonia* and William Fenimore Cooper's *The Deerslayer*.

Twentieth Century

Imagism: An early version of Modernism, Imagism flowed from the experiments of French (Apollinaire, Rimbaud, Baudilaire) and reacted against ornate Romanticism and Victorian poetry. Ezra Pound wrote that imagism attempted, with great simplicity, to capture an intellectual and emotional complex at a particular moment in time. Pound's poem, "In a Station in the Metro" is considered the quintessential example.

Modernism:

American modernists included T. S. Eliot, whose poetry of the "Lost Generation" included *The Wasteland*, and *Four Quartets*. It was allusory, fragmentary, and incorporated tenets of imagism as well as minimalism. Gertrude

Stein's prose was ground-breaking in its exploration of emotional landscapes but using minimalist forms in such works as *The Making of Americans*. Hemingway was deeply influenced by Stein and his prose, *The Snows of Mount Kilimanjaro*, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, *The Sun Also Rises*, *A Farewell to Arms*, and *Death in the Afternoon* influenced a generation of writers.

Minimalism: William Carlos Williams was one of the first of the poets whose work reflected the Armory Show of 1913 in which the modernist art of Europe exploded upon the New York arts scene and the consciousness of a nation and a world in flux. Key elements were meaning through juxtaposition and informal, spoken-word syntax. His collection *Spring and All* was tremendously influential. The experimental Black Mountain School further explored minimalism. The poetry included that of Robert Creeley and Mina Loy's *Lunar Baedeker*, which is a travel guide to magical, nether world.

Surrealism: Exploring the impact of unlikely juxtapositions and the sense of hype-reality, poets were inspired by artists such as Salvador Dali, Rene Magritte, Marc Chagall and Frida Kahlo. They include John Ashbery, whose *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* was very influential.

Social Realism: John Dos Passos wrote a trilogy, *U.S.A. Trilogy*, which include *The 42nd Parallel* (1930), *1919* (1932), and *The Big Money* (1936). It explores the experience of immigrants. Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* was an expose of food processing practices. Nathanael West's *The Day of the Locust* and *Miss Lonelyhearts* explore the dark side of the American Dream with its attendant loneliness and nihilism.

Postmodernism: Postmodernist writing counters the ideas and values that realism and positivism promotes. For Postmodernist writers, reality is a construct, teleology is suspect, time is fragmented into a series of perpetual presents, and a profound rejection of "master narratives" for history and culture. Examples include Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, William Gass's *In the Heart of the Heart of the Country* and *On Being Blue*, Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, and David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*.

Beat Poets: Influenced by Walt Whitman and Imagistic notions of freedom of expression, as well as a pulling together of Buddhist philosophy, the Beat poets wrote to counter the status quo in the 1950s. They included Alan Ginsberg and *Howl* and Lawrence Ferlinghetti's *A Coney Island of the Mind*.

New York School: Influenced by Abstract Expressionism and a painterly, imagistic approach to descriptions and prosody, the New York School included Kenneth Koch, Wallace Stevens, Barbara Guest, and Frank O'Hara.

Confessional Poets: The Confessional School of poetry built on the flow and emotional expressionism of the Beat Poets, but focused more on exploring the notions of psychology and the idea that truth can be found by delving deeply into repressed ideas, emotions, memories and dreams. Examples include Sylvia Plath, Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, and W. D. Snodgrass. It is hard to find a confessional poet who did not eventually commit suicide.

Magical Realism: The structures and themes are deeply influenced by the Boom writers in Latin America who combine history with visions, time travel, magic, and human behavior / emotions. Examples include Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*, John Updike's *The Witches of Eastwick*, and *Ceremony* by Leslie Marmon Silko.

Discussion/Questions

1. Early literature in North America was closely connected to religion. However, it was not the formal religion that was to become more prominent in the late 18th century and later. It had to do with a worldview that attempted to instruct the human being where his or her place was in the world and how to maintain equilibrium. Discuss how religion and literature have a close connection in such a world.

2. The literature of Puritans, Pilgrims and other settlers was highly normative, which is to say that it concerned itself with the "correct" values and beliefs. As such, there were definitely examples of what might happen if one deviated from the values. Examples include sermons and poems that incorporate the "jeremiad" (repent now, or all will be condemned and punished!). Identify examples of normative texts and explain how they illustrative the values and beliefs, as well as potential rewards and punishment.

3. In the 19th century, Romanticism and Transcendentalism took human potential in very different directions. One suggested infinite potential and opportunities for self-actualization and transformation. The other suggested the impossibility of self-transformation or achievement of the American Dream, not only due to economic and class barriers, but also due to dark forces of greed, lust, and secret inability to adhere to strict norms. Discuss some of the works that seem to illustrate such diametrical oppositions and discuss what they suggest about the American experience in the 19th century.

4. The twentieth century was a time of rapid technological, social, and communication change, all of which is explored in the literature of the century. Describe the types of writing that seem to be most extreme (social realism as opposed to minimalism, for example) and discuss how they could, despite their different modes of expression, be exploring the same basic questions about the human condition.

Readings

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