

A Brief History of American Literature

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From the beginning (1700) to 1820

Notes

- The “new world” that Columbus boasted of to the Spanish monarchs in 1500 was neither an expanse of empty space nor a replica of European culture, tools, textiles, and religion, but a combination of Native, European, and African people living in complex relation to one another.
- The Native cultures Columbus found in the New World displayed a huge variety of languages, social customs, and creative expressions, with a common practice of oral literature without parallel east of the Atlantic.
- Exploratory expeditions to the New World quickly led to colonial settlements, as the major European countries vied with each other for a portion of the western hemisphere’s riches.
- The role of writing during the initial establishment and administration of these overseas colonies involved influencing policymakers at home, justifying actions taken without their explicit permission, and bearing witness to the direct and unintended consequences of European conquest of the Americas.
- The Puritans who settled in New England represented a different type of colonist, one that emigrated for religious rather than national or economic reasons.
- Since the English language arrived late to the New World, it was by no means inevitable that the English would dominate, even in their own colonies. But by 1700, the strength of the (mostly religious) literary output of New England had made English the preeminent language of early American literature.
- The state of American literature in 1700, consisting of only about 250 published works, reflects the pressing religious, security, and cultural concerns of colonial life.

Major authors of this age

- Stories of the Beginning of the World
- Native American Trickster Tales
- Hannah Dustan
- Samuel De Champlain (c. 1570-1635)
- Thomas Morton (c. 1579-1647)
- John Smith (1580-1631)
- Christopher Columbus (1451-1506)
- Álvar (o Álvaro) Núñez Cabeza de Vaca (c. 1490–1558)
- Thomas Harriot (1560-1621)
- William Bradford (1590-1657)
- John Winthrop (1588-1649)
- Roger Williams (c. 1603-1683)
- Anne Bradstreet (c. 1612-1672)
- Mary Rowlandson (c. 1636-1711)
- Edward Taylor (c. 1642-1729)

- Cotton Mather (1663-1728)
- Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758)
- Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790)
- Samson Occom (1723-1792)
- J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur (1735-1813)
- John Adams (1735-1826) and Abigail Adams (1744-1818)
- Thomas Paine (1737-1809)
- Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826)
- Olaudah Equiano (1745?-1797)
- Judith Sargent Murray (1751-1820) and Hannah Webster Foster (1762-1837)
- Phillis Wheatley (c. 1753-1784)
- Royall Tyler (1757-1826)

From 1820 to 1865

Notes

- The 1941 publication of F. O. Matthiessen's *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* helped to establish the writers in this volume as pioneers of American literary nationalism who helped shape American literature for the next two centuries.
- After Andrew Jackson's victory at the Battle of New Orleans to end the War of 1812, a heroic national myth grew up around him that asserted the strength and optimism of the American character and suggested a hopeful trajectory for national literature that concentrated on ordinary people.
- The professional writer's ability to devote his or her time to creative writing during the antebellum years was often challenged by differences in international and American copyright laws and by negative attitudes about the writer's occupation.
- Despite these economic difficulties, antebellum writers had the ability to reach a larger and more educated audience than ever before. Many used this opportunity to argue for reform and to represent the necessity of resolving looming cultural conflicts.
- Although the American renaissance should by no means be considered a coherent school or movement, the writers included in this anthology responded to the same pressing issues of their times and stayed in conversation with each other through their writings.

Major authors of this age

- Washington Irving (1783-1859)
- James Fenimore Cooper (1789-1851)
- Catherine Maria Sedgwick (1789-1851)
- William Cullen Bryant (1794-1878)
- William Apess (1798-1839)
- Lydia Maria Child (1802-1880)
- Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882)
- Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864)
- Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882)
- John Greenleaf Whittier (1807-1892)
- Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849)
- Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865)
- Margaret Fuller (1810-1850)

- Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811-1896)
- Fanny Fern (1811–1872) and Elizabeth Drew Stoddard (1823–1902)
- Harriet Jacobs (c. 1813-1897)
- Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862)
- Frederick Douglass (1818-1895)
- Walt Whitman (1819-1892)
- Herman Melville (1819-1891)
- Emily Dickinson (1830-1886)

From 1865 to 1914

Notes

- Between 1865 and 1914, the United States transformed from a country just emerging from a destructive civil war to an imperial nation with overseas possessions and coasts on both the Atlantic and Pacific.
- Though these years brought wealth to some and stature to America in the eyes of the world, the undesirable consequences of rapid territorial, population, and industrial expansion were felt most by those least able to resist the greedy, unscrupulous, and powerful.
- The literature of this period appears in the context of the dramatic diversification of American experience, both ethnic and regional, and the small but insistent movement among authors to combat the social inequities arising from too-rapid growth.
- To face the challenge of representing these dynamic cultural changes, American authors turned to the international aesthetic of realism, which was an attempt to accurately represent life as authors saw it through concrete descriptive details that readers would recognize from their own lives.
- A distinct aesthetic response to the late nineteenth century, American naturalism continued the realist attempt to represent new and unfamiliar types of characters, but naturalists concentrated on lower-class, marginalized people and merged the realist attention to detail with a strong belief in social determinism rather than free will.
- Another crucial development of realism was regional, or “local color”, writing, an attempt to capture distinct language, perspectives, and geographical settings before industrialization and cultural homogenization erased them.

Major authors of this age

- Native American Chants and Songs
- Charlot (c. 1831-1900)
- Mark Twain (Samuel L. Clemens) (1835-1910)
- Maria Amparo Ruiz de Burton (1835-1895)
- William Dean Howells (1837-1920)
- Constance Fenimore Woolson (1840-1894)
- Ambrose Bierce (1842-1914?)
- Sarah Winnemucca (1844-1891) and Zitkala Sa (1876-1938)
- Sarah Orne Jewett (1849-1909)
- Kate Chopin (1850-1904)
- Booker T. Washington (1856?-1915)
- Charles W. Chesnutt (1858-1932)
- Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935) and Theodore Dreiser (1871-1945)
- Bret Harte (1836-1902) and Mary Austin (1868-1934)
- W. E. B. Du Bois (1868-1963)

- James Weldon Johnson (1871-1938) and Paul Lawrence Dunbar (1872-1906)
- Jack London (1876-1916)

From 1914 to 1945

Notes

- Between 1914 and 1945, the United States engaged in two world wars and emerged as a modern nation and a major world power.
- Many of the social and cultural changes of the interwar period centered around the sexual and psychological theories of Sigmund Freud, the social and racial writings of W. E. B. Du Bois, and the economic and political program of Karl Marx.
- Alongside these social changes, rapid advances in science and technology contributed to the rapid modernization of America, resulting in the birth of a mass popular culture and the sundering of empirical science from the artistic search for meaning.
- The crisis point for the interwar period occurred during the 1930s, when international cultural, economic, and political tensions resulted in the Great Depression and World War II.
- The literary aesthetic of “high modernism”, which represented the ways modernity was transforming traditional culture by experimenting with, adapting, and altering literary styles and forms, is best understood as an antagonism between popular and serious literature.
- Though modernism began as a self-consciously international and apolitical aesthetic, many American modernists attempted to use the movement to promote national literary and political ambitions.
- American drama matured during the interwar years thanks to experiments by playwrights reacting to Broadway and successful mixtures of various theatrical elements.

Major authors of this age

- Black Elk (1863-1950)
- Edwin Arlington Robinson (1869-1935)
- Willa Cather (1873-1947)
- Amy Lowell (1874-1925)
- Robert Frost (1874-1963)
- Susan Glaspell (1876-1882)
- Carl Sandburg (1878-1967)
- Wallace Stevens (1879-1955)
- William Carlos Williams (1883-1963)
- H. D. (Hilda Doolittle) (1886-1961)
- Marianne Moore (1887-1972)
- T. S. Eliot (1888-1965)
- Eugene O'Neill (1888-1953)
- Raymond Chandler (1888-1965)
- Claude McKay (1889-1948)
- Katherine Anne Porter (1890-1980)
- Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960)
- Nella Larsen (1891-1964)
- Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892-1950)
- E. Cummings (1894-1962)
- Jean Toomer (1894-1967)
- Scott Fitzgerald (1896-1940)
- William Faulkner (1897-1962)

- Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961)
- Hart Crane (1899-1932)
- Thomas Wolfe (1900-1938) and Richard Wright (1908-1960)
- Sterling Brown (1901-1989) and Langston Hughes (1902-1967)
- Carlos Bulosan (b. 1911)

Since 1945

Notes

- After World War II, the United States emerged as the strongest world power and assumed the role of speaking on behalf of liberal democratic ideals.
- In the aftermath of the economic and cultural reorganizations of the war, American society became fascinated by cultural homogeneity and political unity.
- The literature of the 1950s reflects the cultural preoccupations with stability and conformity as it responded to the aesthetic project of modernism, which preceded World War II.
- The assassination of President John F. Kennedy in 1963 began a dozen years of cultural revolution in which intellectual unrest over the Vietnam War resulted in urban and campus violence, but also gave rise to movements for the betterment of women, blacks, and Native Americans.
- The political divisions, disruptions, and uncertainties of the 1960s were mirrored in the literature of the decade, in which writers came to terms with changing attitudes toward social involvement, government and corporate power, individual and minority rights, drug use, and technological advances like television and consumer air travel that encouraged a global perspective but disrupted normal ways of thinking about time and space.
- After the Vietnam War, Americans voted on their cynicism about government intervention and nostalgia for traditional values by electing Ronald Reagan president in 1980.
- As the Cold War ended, writers worked to broaden the cultural achievements of the 1960s, widening the scope of American experience and casting diversity and plurality as aesthetic ideals.

Major authors of this age

Prose:

- Eudora Welty (b. 1909)
- Tennessee Williams (1911-1983)
- John Cheever (1912-1982)
- Ralph Ellison (1914-1994)
- Saul Bellow (b. 1915)
- Grace Paley (b. 1922)
- Jack Kerouac (1922-1969)
- James Baldwin (1924-1987)
- Flannery O'Connor (1925-1964)
- Ursula K. Le Guin (b. 1929)
- Donald Barthelme (b. 1931)
- Toni Morrison (b. 1931)
- John Updike (b. 1932)
- Thomas Pynchon (b. 1937)
- Raymond Carver (b. 1938)
- Toni Cade Bambara (1939-1995)

- Maxine Hong Kingston (b. 1940)
- Gloria Anzaldúa (b. 1942)
- Alice Walker (b. 1944)
- Annie Dillard (b. 1945)
- David Mamet (b. 1947) and Sam Shepard (b. 1943)
- Leslie Marmon Silko (b. 1948)
- Art Spiegelman (b. 1948)
- Louise Erdrich (b. 1954) and Sherman Alexie (b. 1966)
- Richard Powers (b. 1957)
- Jhumpa Lahiri (b. 1967)

Poetry:

- Robert Penn Warren (1905-1989)
- Theodore Roethke (1908-1963)
- Charles Olson (1910-1970)
- Elizabeth Bishop (1911-1979)
- Robert Hayden (1913-1980)
- Randall Jarrell (1914-1965)
- John Berryman (1914-1972)
- Robert Lowell (1917-1977)
- Richard Wilbur (b. 1921)
- Denise Levertov (1923-1997)
- A. R. Ammons (1926-2001)
- James Merrill (1926-1995)
- Robert Creeley (b. 1926)
- Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997)
- Galway Kinnell (b. 1927)
- John Ashbery (b. 1927)
- Anne Sexton (1928-1974)
- Adrienne Rich (b. 1929)
- Gary Snyder (b. 1930)
- Sylvia Plath (1932-1963)
- Michael S. Harper (b. 1938)
- Simon J. Ortiz (b. 1941)
- Billy Collins (b. 1941)
- Louise Glück (b. 1943) and Cathy Song (b. 1955)
- Joy Harjo (b. 1951)
- Rita Dove (b. 1952)
- Li-Young Lee (b. 1957)