

## AN OUTLINE OF AMERICAN LITERATURE

### The Colonial Period, Beginnings to 1790

- The Spaniards, the Portugueses, and the French preceded the English in colonization of the New World, but whereas the Spaniards came for gold and the French for furs, the English came to settle the land.
- For the first 100 years, the English colonies were confined to the seacoast from Maine to Florida; the westward movement to Pacific waited until the late eighteenth century.

### Puritanism

- Puritanism emerged in England around 1500s, its aim was to "purify" the Church of England.
- Seeking religious freedom (and material advantage) and fearing that Charles I might return the country to Roman Catholicism, from 1620-1630, 20,000 Puritans immigrated to New England. Many of them were well-educated, cultured, and of good family.
- Education became a religious duty. Puritans founded schools and colleges and established printing presses.

### John Smith (1580-1631)

- He was the first to form a personal image from his experience in the English colonies in America and he wrote about them in vivid prose. John Smith is generally regarded as the earliest writer of American literature.
- *The General Historie of Virginia, New England, and the Summer Isles* (1624), his best known book. It tells of a life so filled with high adventure that Smith's veracity was long doubted but modern scholarship has validated most of his story. His rescue on the point of execution by Powatan's daughter, Pocahontas, whether true or not, is one of American great legends.

### William Bradford (1590-1657) and John Winthrop (1588-1649)

- Bradford began writing *Of Plymouth Plantation* in 1630 with an account of the religious considerations that caused the separatist group to leave England first for Holland and thereafter in Mayflower for America. Bradford continued his chronicle of the Pilgrim experience to 1650, when the original community had become dispersed and lost its spiritual identity in pursuit of economic gain.
- Winthrop wrote journal *The History of New England*. He was a minister and the first governor of Massachusetts Bay Colony. Like all of the Puritan historians, he believed that most events could be seen as the sign from God, for example, when a snake was found

and killed in a church, people saw this as the victory of New England religion over Satan.

### The Birth of a Nation

- The most memorable writing in eighteenth century America was done by the founding fathers, the men who led the Revolution of 1775-1783 and who wrote the Constitution of 1789. None of them were writers of fiction. Rather, they were practically philosophers, and their most typical product was the political pamphlet. They admired and were active in the European "Age of Reason" or "Enlightenment." They shared the Enlightenment belief that human intelligence or "reason" could understand both nature and man. Unlike the Puritans-who saw man as a sinful failure-the enlightenment thinkers were sure man could improve himself. They wanted to create a happy society based on justice and freedom.
- Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790), his writings show enlightenment in American literature. *Daagood Papers* (1722) and *Poor Richard's Almanac* (1732-1757) are the example. Both give moral advice.
- Thomas Paine (1737-1809) wrote *Common Sense* (1776), the most historically important pamphlet in American history. Its clear thinking and exciting language quickly united American feelings against England. He seemed to express what the readers themselves had been secretly thinking.
- Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826) was the chief author of the *Declaration of Independence* (1776).

### The Rise of a national Literature

- In the early of the new republic, there was disagreement about how American literature should grow. There were three different points of view. One group worried that American literature still lacked national feeling. They wanted books which expressed the special character of the nation, not book which were based on European culture. Another group felt that American literature was too young to declare its independence from British literary tradition. They believed that the United States should see itself as a new branch of English culture. The third group also felt that the call for a national literature was a mistake. For them, good literature was universal, always rising above the time and place where it was written. The argument continued for almost a hundred years without any clear decision. As American literature grew and flowered, the greatest writers found a way to combine the best qualities of the literature of the Old and New World.

- Washington Irving (1783-1859) wrote *The Sketch Book* (1832) containing two stories “Rip Van Winkle” and “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow.” Both stories are based on German folk tales, but Irving fills them with the “local color” of New York’s Hudson River Valley.
- James Fennimore Cooper (1789-1851) wrote *The Pioneer* (1823) and *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), both of which describe such American character types as the pioneer (one who goes first into the country).
- Walt Whitman (1819-1892) was a poet who wrote *Leaves of Grass*.
- Frederick Douglass (1818-1895), an African American, wrote a slave narrative, *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845).

### The American Romanticism

- American literary romanticism derives mainly from the English Romantic poets, Coleridge and Wordsworth, and from German Romantic philosophy.
- Some of the principal Romantic themes in American literature are:
  1. Intuition (the truth of the heart) is more trustworthy than reason.
  2. To express deeply felt experience is more valuable than to elaborate universal principles
  3. The individual is at the center of life and God is at the center of the individual.
- Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote *Nature* (1836), and an essay, ‘Self Reliance.’ Both are the most important expressions of his Romanticism. He was one of the proponents of **transcendentalism**.
- Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864) was one of the opponents of transcendentalism. He always wrote about man in society rather than simply about man in nature. His characters usually have some secret guilt or problem which keep them at a distance from other people, for example *The Scarlet Letter* (1850).

### The Continental Nation

- The Civil War transformed the distinct regions into a nation dominated by Northern business and finance. New laws encouraged industry on a large scale. The growth of cities followed New York, with a population of 3 million was the second largest in the world, and such cities came to dominate American life. The rapid growth of railroads made the entire nation accessible. The intensified awareness of regional differences and

geographical extent was met by regional writers and local colorists.

- Regional writing and local color: the Civil War and the rapid extension railroads that followed awakened a new interest among Americans in regions and localities of their reunited nation. One manifestation of this new interest was the emergence of regional writings and local color. Mark Twain or Samuel L. Clemens (1835-1910) is regarded as a major regional writer. He wrote *Tom Sawyer* (1876), *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885).

### The Era of Realism and Naturalism

- The ideas of Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer undermined the super-naturalistic basis of American morality. Realism and, later naturalism, were literary modes well suited to interpret a materialistic society.
- American Literary Realism dominated American prose fiction from 1865-1900. Generally speaking, American literary realism sets its story in the here-and-now and among persons of average social position, accurately reproducing their speech and manners in actions which are true to human behavior. The characters contend, on the whole optimistically, with ethical problems which they attempt to solve and arrive at the end of their story without the help of coincidence or improbable intervention.
- Henry James (1843-1916) and William dean Howell (1837-1920) belong to the realists. James' works, for example, are *The American* (1877) and the long story "Daisy Miller" (1879) and Howell's are *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885) and "Editha" (1905).
- American literary naturalism is conscious of its philosophical foundations, drawing upon science and especially upon Darwinism for its view of humanity, and upon the immediately antecedent work in Europe of Emile Zola. The philosophy is that human person regarded as a highly developed animal existing no longer a little below the angels but rather a little above the other apes. The naturalist looks for his characters among under classes of the cities, the rural poor, and the primitive.
- Frank Norris (1870-1902), was regarded as the naturalist. His characters are often unable to control their own lives. They are moved around by "passion" or by "fate". The whole world, natural and human, is a battlefield between uncontrollable forces, for example in *McTeague* (1899).
- Jack London (1876-1916) was influenced by Darwin's idea of constant struggle in nature (the survival of the fittest) as seen in *Call of the Wild* (1903).

## The Progressive Era

- The period from 1890s to beyond the end of World War I was filled with enthusiasm for a wide variety of social and economic reforms. Most of the writers who wrote with sincere conviction were social critics.
- Theodore Dreiser (1871-1945) was one of America's greatest writers and its greatest naturalist writer. He and his characters did not attack the nation's puritanical moral code, but they simply ignore it. The purposelessness of life is reflected theme of Dreiser's novel such as *Sister Carrie* (1900) and *Jennie Gerhardt* (1911).
- Willa Cather (1873-1947) was one of the women novelists who came into prominence during the first year of the twentieth century. A regionalist and a realist, she describes the lives of the immigrant farm people in Nebraska where she grew up in the late 1800s. Two of her novels, *O Pioneers* (1913) and *My Antonia* (1918) are about immigrant families struggling to establish farms on the Nebraska prairie.

## American Literature on the mainstream of Western Culture

- After the World War I, military, political, and business forces created a reactionary climate hostile to new social and artistic ideas. Many young writers left America for Europe, where they found freedom to scrutinize the values of their country more critically than had the older writers who were left behind. But if their technical refinement was European, their subject matter was American.
- Modernism is the term applied to an international movement dominating the arts of Western culture from shortly after the turn of the twentieth century until around 1950.
- Gertrude Stein (1874-1946) was an expatriate in Paris from 1903 until her death. Most of her writing remains at best difficult for common reader. She was influential on American writing in the twentieth century. In a way she made her own English language into an entirely new language. She threw away the rules of traditional grammar and made her words act completely new ways. For example in *Useful Knowledge* (1928) she states: "one and one and one and one and one and one..." She goes continuing this way and does not stop until she announces that we have reached "one hundred." She is telling us that this is the reality of the term "one hundred." Therefore we must read her writings **word by word**. Each word has the same completely independent existence.
- TS Elliot (1888-1965) was "traditionalist." In a way he rejects Stein's "past-less" writing. In his poem "Waste Land" he described the spiritual emptiness of the world after the WW I.

- F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896-1940) called the 1920s “the Jazz Age.” His fictions tell the story of this period and thereby defined it. *The Great Gatsby* (1925) describes the collapse of Gatsby’s great American Dream.

### The Thirties ( The Great Depression)

- The economic collapse of 1929 destroyed the happy, confident mood of America in the “jazz age” twentieth. Millions of Americans lost their jobs as the nation entered the Depression era. America was entering a new period of social anger and self-criticism.
- John Steinbeck (1902-1968) had his great success during the Depression of the 1930s. His characters are driven by forces in themselves and in society: fear, hunger, sex, disaster of nature, and the evil of Capitalism. *Of Mice and Men* (1937) is one of his novels having such theme.

### The Forties and Fifties

- When the WW II started in Europe in 1939, most Americans wanted to stay out of it. “America first!” was a popular phrase at the time. People felt that America should worry about its own problems and forget the rest of the world. The Japanese attacked on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 changed all that. By 1945, America was a world power with huge international responsibilities.
- After the war, America entered an “Age of Anxiety.” The politics of America was influenced by two great fears. First, there was the fear of Bomb; many of Americans were sure that there would be a war with the Soviet Union using atomic bombs. Also, in the late forties and early fifties, fear of Communism became a national sickness.
- WW II produced a large number of war novels, many of them quite good. James Jones (1921-1977) in *From Here to Eternity* (1951) looks at the bad effects army life on the minds of soldier.
- American authors in the fifties showed that that they were very uncomfortable in the post WW II. The new political fears were less important to them than their own psychological problems in the new American society. Many writers of this period tried to find new answers to the old question “who am I?” Saul Bellow (1915- ) in *Dangling Man* (1944) describes a man who is waiting to be called into the army during the WW II. The problem of the character in the novel is “existential” problem.

## The Sixties and Seventies

- The 1960s were years of great cultural excitement and social pain. In the fifties, the “Hippies” looked for new experiences through love, drugs, Oriental Religion. By the middle of the sixties, the streets were filled with angry young men people demanding equal rights for blacks and an end of the Vietnam War. By 1970, the national mood was very unhappy. The war was going badly and Americans were losing their confidence.
- Beginning with the women’s liberation movement of the 1970s, literature came under the scrutiny of feminist, gay, African American, Native American, and Marxist Criticism.
- Gwendolyn Brooks (1917- ) wrote poems that tell about the tragedy of black life in America. In *Malcolm X* she describes this black revolutionary leader.
- Alice Walker (1944- ) is an African American and a feminist. Her fiction draws upon the black experience in the American South and by creating strong women characters of her heroic achievement, as seen in *Meridian* (1982).

## Popular Fiction

- The popular stories and characters are loved by millions of American and foreign fans. The popular fiction is a very important part in American culture. American humor, mystery stories, Western and science fiction are now part of the culture of the whole world.
- Edgar Rice Burroughs (1875-1950) wrote *Tarzan of the Apes* (1914).
- Erle Stanley Gardner (1889-1970) created “Perry Mason” series novels.
- Zane Grey (1872-1939) made the Western novel as popular as the detective story in America. His seventy-seven novels, about cowboys and “outlaws” in the Wild West, seem quite old fashioned today. His heroes are always brave and morally good. His novels *Riders of the Purple Sage* (1912), *The Lone Star ranger* (1915), *West of the Pecos* (1935) were made into movies in the twenties and thirties.

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