



The Role of American Literature in the World Literature

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Abstract. *Some of the earliest forms of American literature were pamphlets and writing extolling the benefits of the colonies to both a European and colonist audience. The revolutionary period also contained political writings, including those by colonists Samuel Adams, Josiah Quincy, John Dickinson, and Joseph Galloway, a loyalist to the crown. Two key figures were Benjamin Franklin are esteemed works with their wit and influence toward the formation of a budding American identity. Paine's pamphlet Common Sense and Tge American Crisis writings are seen as playing a key role in influencing the political tone of the period.*

Key words: *pamphlets, poetry, literary work, doggrel verse, tradition*

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Introduction

American literature is the written or literary work produced in the area of the United States and its preceding colonies. For more specific discussions of poetry and theater, see Poetry of the United States and Theater in the United States. During its early history, America was a series of British colonies on the eastern coast of the present-day United States. Therefore, its literary tradition begins as linked to the broader tradition of English literature. However, unique American characteristics and the breadth of its production usually now cause it to be considered a separate path and tradition. Owing to the large immigration to Boston in the 1630, the high articulation of Buritancultural ideals, and the early establishment of a college and a printing press in Cambrige the New England colonies have often been regarded as the center of early American literature. However, the first European settlements in North America had been founded elsewhere many years earlier.

Towns older than Boston include the Spanish settlements at Saint Augustine and Santa Fe, the Dutch settlements at Albany and New Amsterdam as well as the American colony of Jamestown in present-day Virginia. During the colonial period, the printing press was active in many areas, from Cambridge and Boston to New York, Philadelphia, and Annapolis. The dominance of the English language was hardly inevitable. The first item printed in Pennsylvania was in German and was the largest book printed in any of the colonies before the American Revolution.

Spanish and French had two of the Strongest colonial literary traditions in the areas that now comprise the United States and discussions of early American literature commonly include texts by Alvar Nunez Cabeze de Vaca and Samuel de Champlain alongside English language texts by Thomas Harriot and John Smith. Moreover we are now aware of the wealth of oral literary traditions

already existing on the continent among the numerous different Native American groups. Political events, howling a language for the colonies at large as well as the literary language of choice. For instance when the English conquered New Amsterdam in 1664, they renamed it New York and changed the administrative language from Dutch to English.

From 1696 to 1700, only about 250 separate items were issued from the major printing presses in the American colonies. This is a small number compared to the output of the printers in London at the time. However, printing was established in the American colonies before it was allowed in most of England. In England restrictive laws had long, confined printing to four locations: London, York, Oxford and Cambridge. Because of this, the colonies ventured into the modern world earlier than their provincial English counterparts. Some of the earliest forms of American literature were pamphlets and writing extolling the benefits of the colonies to both a European and colonist audience. Captain John Smith could be considered the first American author with his works: *A True Relation of... Virginia...* (1608) and *The General Historie of Virginia, New England, and the Summer Isles* (1624). Other writers of this manner included Daniel Denton, Thomas Ashe, William Penn, George Percy, William Strachey, John Hammond, Daniel Coxe, Gabriel Thomas, and John Lawson. The religious disputes that prompted settlement in America were also topics of early writing. A journal written by John Winthrop discussed the religious foundations of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Edward Winslow also recorded a diary of the first years after the Mayflower's arrival. Other religiously influenced writers included Increase Mather and William Bradford, author of the journal published as *A History of Plymouth Plantation, 1620-47*. Others like Roger Williams and Nathaniel Ward more fiercely argued state and church separation. Some poetry also existed. Anne Bradstreet and Edward Taylor are especially noted. Michael Wigglesworth wrote also known for his doggerel verse. Other late writings described conflicts and interaction with the Indians, as seen in writings by Daniel Gookin, Alexander Whitaker, John Mason, Benjamin Church, and Mary Rowlandson. John Eliot translated the Bible into the Algonquin language.

Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield represented the Great Awakening, a religious revival in the early 18th century that asserted strict Calvinism. Other Puritan and religious writers include Thomas Hooker, Thomas Shepard, Uriah Oakes, John Wise, and Samuel Willard. Less strict and serious writers included Samuel Sewall, Sarah Kemble Knight, and William Byrd. During the revolution itself, poems and songs such as "Yankee Doodle" and "Nathan Hale" were popular. Major satirists included John Trumbull and Francis Hopkinson. Philip Morin Freneau also wrote poems about the war's course. Puritan poetry was highly religious in nature, and one of the earliest books of poetry published was the Bay Psalm Book a set of translations of the biblical Psalms: however, the translator's intention was not to create great literature but to create hymns that could be used in worship. Among lyric poets, the most important figures are Anne Bradstreet who wrote personal poems about her family and homelife; pastor Edward Taylor whose best poems, the *Preparatory Meditations*, were written to help him prepare for leading worship; and Michael Wigglesworth, whose best-selling poem, *The Day of Doom* describes the time of judgment. Nicholas Noyes was also known for his doggerel verse.

Other late writings described conflicts and interaction with the Indians, as seen in writings by Daniel Gookin, Alexander Whitaker, John Mason, Benjamin Church, and Mary Rowlandson. John Eliot translated the Bible into the Algonquin language. Of the second generation of New England settlers, Cotton Mather stands out as a theologian and historian, who wrote the history of the colonies with a view to God's activity, in their midst and to connecting the Puritan leaders with the great heroes of the Christian faith. His best-known works include *Magnalia Christi Americana*, *The Wonders of the Invisible World* and *The Biblia Americana*. Hawthorne's fiction had a profound impact on his friend Herman Melville who first made a name for himself by turning

material from his seafaring days into exotic and sensational sea narrative novels. Inspired by Hawthorne's focus on allegories and dark psychology, Melville went on to write romances replete with philosophical speculation. In *Moby-Dick* an adventurous whaling voyage became the vehicle for examining such themes as obsession, the nature of evil, and human struggle against the elements. In another fine work, the short novel *Billy Budd* Melville dramatizes the conflicting claims of duty and compassion on board a ship in time of war. His more profound books sold poorly and he had been long forgotten, by the time of his death. He was rediscovered in the early decades of the XX century.

Anti-transcendental works from Melville, Hawthorne and Poe all comprise the Dark Romanticism subgenre of literature popular during this time. American dramatic literature, by contrast, remained dependent on European models, many playwrights did attempt to apply these forms to American topics and themes, such as immigrants westward expansion, temperance, etc.

At the same time, American character types especially the "Yankee", the "Negro" and the "Indian" exemplified by the character of Jonathan, Sambo and Metamora. In addition, new dramatic forms were created in the Tom shows, the showboat theatre and the minstrel show. Among the best plays of the period are James Nelson Barker's *Superstition*.

At the beginning of the 20th century, American novelists were expanding fiction's social spectrum to encompass both high and low life and sometimes connected to the naturalist school of realism. In her stories and novels, Edith Wharton (1862-1937) scrutinized the upper class, Eastern-seaboard society in which she had grown up. One of her finest books, *The Age of Innocence*, centers on a man who chooses to marry a conventional, socially acceptable woman rather than a fascinating outsider. At about the same time, Stephen Crane (1871-1900), best known for his Civil War novel *The Red Badge of Courage*, depicted the life of New York City prostitutes in *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*. And in *Sister Carrie*, Theodore Dreiser (1871-1945) portrayed a country girl who moves to Chicago and becomes a kept woman. Hamlin Garland and Frank Norris wrote about the problems of American farmers and other social issues from a naturalist perspective. More directly political writings discussed social issues and power of corporations. Some like Edward Bellamy in *Looking Backward* outlined other possible political and social frameworks. Upton Sinclair, most famous for his meat-packing novel *The Jungle*, advocated socialism. Other political writers of the period included Edwin Markham, William Vaughn Moody. Journalistic critics, including Ida M. Tarbell and Lincoln Steffens were labeled the *Muckrakers*. Henry Adams' *Literary Autobiography*, *The Education of Henry Adams* also depicted a stinging description of the education system and modern life.

Experimentation in style and form soon joined the new freedom in subject matter. In 1909, Gertrude Stein (1874-1946), by then an expatriate in Paris, published *Three Lives*, an innovative work of fiction influenced by her familiarity with cubism, jazz, and other movements in contemporary art and music. Stein labeled a group of American literary notables who lived in Paris in the 1920s as the "Lost Generation". The poet Ezra Pound (1895-1972) was born in Idaho but spent much of his adult life in Europe. His work is complex, sometimes obscure, with multiple references to other art forms and to a vast range of literature, both Western and Eastern. He influenced many other poets, notably T.S. Eliot (1898-1965), another expatriate. Eliot wrote spare, cerebral poetry, carried by dense structure of symbols. In "The Waste Land" he embodied a jaundiced vision of post-World War I society in fragmented, haunted images. Like Pound's, Eliot's poetry could be highly allusive, and some editions of *The Waste Land* come with footnotes supplied by the poet. In 1954, Eliot won the Nobel Prize in Literature.

American writers also expressed the disillusionment following upon the war. The stories and novels of F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896-1940) capture the restless, pleasure-hungry, defiant mood of the 1920s. Fitzgerald's characteristic theme, expressed poignantly in *The Great Gatsby*, is the tendency of youth's golden dreams to dissolve in failure and disappointment. Sinclair Lewis and Sherwood Anderson also wrote novels with critical depictions of American life. John Dos Passos wrote about the war and also the U.S.A. trilogy which extended into the Depression.

Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961) saw violence and death first-hand as an ambulance driver in World War I, and the carnage persuaded him that abstract language was mostly empty and misleading. He cut out unnecessary words from his writing, simplified the sentence structure, and concentrated on concrete objects and actions. He adhered to a moral code that emphasized grace under pressure and his protagonists were strong, silent men who often dealt awkwardly with women. *The Sun Also Rises* and *A Farewell to Arms* are generally considered his best novels; in 1954, he won the Nobel Prize in Literature. Five years before Hemingway, another American novelist had won the Nobel Prize: William Faulkner (1897-1962). Faulkner managed to encompass an enormous range of humanity in Yoknapatawpha County, a Mississippian region of his own invention. He recorded his characters' seemingly unedited ramblings in order to represent their inner states, a technique called "stream of consciousness". (In fact, these passages are carefully crafted, and their seemingly chaotic structure conceals multiple layers of meaning.) He also jumped time sequences to show how the past—especially the slave-holding era of the Deep South—endures in the present. Among his great works are *The Sound and the Fury*, *Absalom, Absalom!*, *Go Down, Moses*, and *The Unvanquished*. Depression era literature was blunt and direct in its social criticism. John Steinbeck was born in Salinas, California, where he set many of his stories. His style was simple and evocative, winning him the favor of the readers but not of the critics. Steinbeck often wrote about poor, working-class people and their struggle to lead a decent and honest life: he was probably the most socially aware writer of his period. *The Grapes of Wrath*, considered his masterpiece, is a strong, socially-oriented novel that tells the story of the Joads, a poor family from Oklahoma and their journey to California in search of a better life. Other popular novels include *Tortilla Flat*, *Of Mice and Men*, *Cannery Row*, and *East of Eden*. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1962. Other writers sometimes considered part of the proletarian school include Nathanael West, Fielding Burke, Jack Conroy, Tom Cramer, Robert Cantwell, Albert Halper, and Edward Anderson. Henry Miller assumed a unique place in American literature in the 1930s when his semiautobiographical novels, written and published in Paris, were banned from the U.S. Although his major works, which include *Tropic of Cancer* (novel) and *Black Spring*, wouldn't be cleared for American sale and publication until 1962, their themes and stylistic innovations had already exerted a major influence on succeeding generations of American writers.

The period in time from the end of World War II up until, roughly, the late 1960s and early 1970s saw the publication of some of the most popular works in American history. The last few of the more realistic Modernists along with the wildly Romantic Beatniks largely dominated the period, while the direct respondents to America's involvement in World War II contributed in their notable influence. Though born in Canada, Chicago-raised Saul Bellow would become the most influential novelist in America in the decades following World War II. In works like *The Adventures of Augie March* and *Henderson the Rain King*, Bellow painted vivid portraits of the American city and the distinctive characters peopling it. Many post-Modern authors are also well known for setting scenes in fast food restaurants, on subways, or in shopping malls; they write about writers, drugs, plastic surgery, and television commercials. Sometimes, these depictions look almost like celebrations. But simultaneously, writers in this school take a knowing, self-conscious, sarcastic, and condescending attitude towards their subjects. Bret Easton Ellis, Dave Eggers, Chuck Palahniuk, and David Foster Wallace are, perhaps, most well known for these particular tendencies.

The connection of American literature with writing in England and Europe was again stressed by William Dean Howells, who was not only an able novelist but an instructor in literary realism to other American writers. Though he himself had leanings toward social reform, Howells did encourage what has come to be called "genteel" writing, long dominant in American fiction. The mold for this sort of writing was broken by the American turned Englishman, Henry James, who wrote of people of the upper classes but with such psychological penetration, subtlety of narrative, and complex technical skill that he is recognized as one of the great masters of fiction.

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