

Annotated  
Timeline of  
The  
American  
Literary  
Development

# Overview

1. Foundations: beginning of humanity until 1800
  - Native American beginning of time to 1600
  - Puritan/Colonial (1600-1750)
  - Rationalism (Revolutionary/Age of Reason) (1750-1800)
1. Romanticism - Gothic (1800-1860)
  - American Renaissance/ Transcendentalism (1840-1860)
1. Realism/ Naturalism (1855-1915)
2. The Moderns (1900-1950)
  - Harlem Renaissance/ Jazz Age (1920s)
1. Contemporary (1970s-Present)
  - Post-Modernism (1950 to present)

# Native American Literature (dawn of humanity - 1600)

- OVERVIEW OF Native American PERIOD:
  - Oral and historical traditions,
  - creation stories,
  - culture/survival in North American environment
  - Considered the natural world as sacred
  - Importance of land and Place



*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).



# Puritan/Colonial Period (1600-1750)

- OVERVIEW OF PURITAN/COLONIAL PERIOD:
  - humankind as innately evil with emphasis on original sin
  - all truth and knowledge is credited to divine revelation
  - signs of damnation and evil in all events (poverty-laziness, sickness- moral laxness, etc.)
  - Doctrine of the Elect: predetermined which souls will be saved regardless of behavior- Puritan life could be extremely austere/harsh with intense effort to demonstrate oneself to be part of "the elect"
  - purpose of writing is to glorify God and see God's work in all human occurrences

# Puritan Era



# Puritan/Colonial Period (1600-1750)

- **Genre/Style** :Sermons, religious tracts, diaries, personal narratives, religious poems. It was written in plain style.
- **Effect/Aspects** :Instructive, reinforces authority of the Bible and the church. Very little imaginative literature was produced.
- **Historical Context** :Puritan settlers fled England where they were being persecuted for their religious beliefs, and came to New England to have religious freedom. Religious beliefs were too conservative and strict for acceptance in England.

# Puritan/Colonial Period (1600-1750)

## Literary and Cultural Legacy

Puritan literature is one seed of the American identity as it stresses self-reliance and overcoming hardship to achieve human perfection. It will often focus on the hardships the author has endured, praise for the Christian God, and descriptions how the author has emerged from that hardship to achieve a more complete understanding of Christian spirituality.



*American  
Lit. in the  
1600's –  
1700's*



Anne  
Bradstreet



Benjamin  
Franklin



Thomas Paine



# Puritan/Colonial Period (1650-1750)

- Anne Bradstreet

- The first published compilation of poems by an American was also the first American book to be published by a woman, Anne Bradstreet. Born and educated in England, Anne Bradstreet was the daughter of an earl's estate manager. She emigrated with her family when she was 18, and she lived in Boston.
- "The Prologue", investigates her own ability, her role as a female poet.
- homesick imagination in her poem "Dialogue Between Old England and New" which emphasizes the relationship between the motherland and the colonies as parental;

Living in a Puritan society, Bradstreet did not approve of the stereotypical idea that women were inferior to men during the 1600s. Women were expected to spend all their time cooking, cleaning, taking care of their children, and attending to their husband's every need. In her poem "In Honour of that High and Mighty Princess Queen Elizabeth of Happy Memory," Bradstreet questions this belief.



# Puritan/Colonial Period (1650-1750)

- Cotton Mather
  - No timeline of American colonial literature would be complete without mentioning Cotton Mather, the master scholar. Third in the four-generation Mather dynasty of Massachusetts Bay, he wrote at length of New England in over 500 books and pamphlets.

# Rationalism (Revolutionary Period/Age of Reason) (1750-1800)

- Overview
- sees man, nature, and the universe as inherently good
- values reason over emotion, intuition, tradition, and established doctrine
- rejects tyranny, fascism, faith, divine revelation, and superstition
- concerned with the empirical world rather than life after death
- emphasizes self-knowledge and self-control
- wide range of subjects: philosophy, politics, science, and nature
- Deism common religious belief
- Responsible for initiating and sustaining American Revolution
- Inspired by the ideas of empiricist philosophers such as Aristotle and John Locke

# Rationalism (Revolutionary Period/Age of Reason) (1750-1800)

- **Genre/Style** :Political Pamphlets, Travel Writing, and highly ornate persuasive writing.
  - formal, disciplined, and dense rhetorical prose
  - writing is crafted to be highly persuasive
  - produced almost no literary fiction or poetry
  - writers were highly intellectual and highly educated statesmen
- **Effect/Aspects** :Patriotism and pride grows, creates unity about issues, and creates American character.
- **Historical Context** :Encouraged Revolutionary War support.

# Rationalism (Revolutionary Period/Age of Reason) (1750-1800)

- Cultural Legacy
  - “We hold these truths to be self-evident”- defining what is true and explaining how this truth can be realized
  - the fallibility of human senses means that information gathered through deduction and experimentation is more valid than what we perceive to be true



# Revolutionary Period/Age of Reason (1750-1800)

- Washington Irving
  - He was the youngest of 11 children, born to a wealthy New York mercantile family. Washington Irving became a cultural and diplomatic ambassador to Europe, like Benjamin Franklin and Nathaniel Hawthorne. In spite of his talent, he probably would not have become a full-time professional writer, given the need of financial rewards, if a series of unexpected incidents had not forced him to write.





# Revolutionary Period/Age of Reason (1750-1800)

- Benjamin Franklin(17Jan 1707- 17 April 1790)
  - Benjamin Franklin, "practical yet idealistic, hard-working and enormously successful," was a second-generation immigrant who lived in Boston Massachusetts. Writer, printer, publisher, scientist, philanthropist, and diplomat, Mr. Franklin was the most famous and respected private figure of his time. He was the first great self-made man in America, a poor democrat born in an aristocratic age that he helped to loosen up through his excellent example.

# *Benjamin Franklin*



- One of the founding fathers of the U.S.A.
- His works, "Poor Richard's Almanac" and his own autobiography were recordings of his rise from a state of poverty and obscurity to wealth and fame.
- Some of the mottos we hear today came from him.

"Lost time is never found again."

"A penny saved is a penny earned."

"Fish and visitors stink in three days."

"Early to bed and early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise."

# Thomas Paine



- Wrote a very powerful pamphlet entitled, "*Common Sense*," which virtually every rebel read. It was proportionally the all-time-best-selling American title which crystallized the rebellious demand for independence from Great Britain.
- His next work entitled, "*The American Crisis*" was a prerevolutionary pamphlet series that was so influential that John Adams said, "Without the pen of the author of *Common Sense*, the sword of Washington would have been raised in vain."

# Romanticism (1800-1860)

- Overview of Romanticism
- Romanticism is a way of thinking that values the individual over the group, the subjective over the objective, and a person's emotional experience over reason. It also values the wildness of nature over human-made order. Romanticism as a worldview took hold in western Europe in the late 18th century, and American writers embraced it in the early 19th century.
- emphasizes a love of nature, celebrates the common man, and values country life (as ideals)
- Rationalists look to Aristotle's empiricism; Romantics look to Plato's idealism

# Romanticism (1800-1860)

- Overview of Romanticism
- **Genre/Style** :Character Sketches, Slave Narratives, Poetry, and short stories.
  - introspective; focuses on what emotionally motivates the characters
  - the speaker and the poet are usually the same person
  - references mythology and cultural lore for thematic material
- **Effect/Aspects** :Integrity of nature and freedom of imagination.
- **Historical Context** :Removal from harsh realities of wilderness, create opportunity to idealize its innocence and ease (think frolicking in the woods to appreciate the flora and fauna as opposed to subjugating the harsh wilderness to farm and protect livestock) Publishing expands and industrial revolution brings new ideas, as well as relatively more "leisure time" to indulge in fiction/poetry/ philosophy away from the familial and small town moral confines.

# Rationalism & Empiricism

## Empiricism

- Knowledge is based on experience and experimentation.
- Experimental science is the paradigm of knowledge.
- Experience and experiment rarely, if ever, produce certainty.
- Some empiricists believe that mathematics can be certain.

## Rationalism

- Knowledge is based on the use of reason or logic.
- Mathematics is the paradigm of knowledge.
- Genuine knowledge is certain.
- Relation to experience:
  - Experience does not produce certainty and does not conform to reason.
  - Thus, experience is at best second-class knowledge.

# Romanticism (1800-1860)

- *Literary and Cultural Legacy*
- nature as the setting in which man could realize and develop his true self. R's believed that America's newly burgeoning urban cities contributed to the decay of morality and individuality. All aspects of nature, including the supernatural, part of an ideal natural setting. R's often focus on the excitement of the American landscape, most of which was wilderness in this period.

# Gothic (dark Romanticism) (1800-1860)

- Overview of Gothic
  - humanity, nature, and the universe are neither innately good nor evil, but tip assuredly toward evil
  - rejects the optimistic superficiality of mainstream Romantic idealism
  - humans are not ideal creatures; they are flawed and tend toward darkness
  - uses mysticism to bridge the gap between this world and whatever looms beyond



# Gothic (dark Romanticism) (1800-1860)

- **Genre/Style :**
  - themes focus principally upon man's appetite for darkness and mystical encounters with the sublime (that which inspires awe)
  - find literary art in the darkest most portentous human emotions: sadness, anxiety, depression, anger, revenge, monomania, fear, pain, loss, jealousy, hate, rage, and envy.
  - pushes back against several preceding movements- seeks to expose hypocrisy of Puritans and Rationalists' faith in reason over spirit. Relates to Transcendentalists' attempts to connect to a higher plane of existence, but unlike Transcendentalism which assumes an inherent goodness, *G* identifies with the inherent evil of all mankind and seeks to expose the "underbelly" of ostensibly solid, moral society.
- **Effect/Aspects:** elevated syntax, allusion, metaphor, simile, imagery, abstractions, common people in fantastical situations, elevated beautiful people

# Gothic (dark Romanticism) (1800-1860)

- **Historical Context** :Publishing expands and industrial revolution brings new ideas, as well as relatively more "leisure time" to indulge in fiction/poetry/ philosophy away from the familial and small town moral confines. Sordid urban experience, corruption, and exploitation of IR.

# Gothic (dark Romanticism) (1800-1860)

- *Literary and Cultural Legacy*
- No character is unflawed, and no situation is untouched by the corruption of the human mind, body, or spirit. Gothics see the world as dynamic, but out of the control of human characters who inevitably meet with failure when they attempt to affect change. The melancholy hero, also referred to as the "anti-hero" is an unlikely character who battles his own demons. Often, a misunderstood villain turns to his crime because he is lonely or rejected. The heroine may fall in love with the villain or reject him, eventually leading to destructive and self-destructive behavior.



# Romanticism (1800-1860)

- Herman Melville
  - Herman Melville was a descendant of an old, wealthy family that fell suddenly into poverty upon the death of the father. In spite of his aristocratic upbringing, proud family traditions, and hard work, Melville found himself in poverty with no college education. At 19 he went to sea. His interest in sailors' lives grew naturally out of his own experiences, and most of his early novels grew out of his voyages. In these we see the young Melville's wide, democratic experience and hatred of tyranny and injustice.



# Romanticism (1800-1860)

- Edgar Allan Poe
  - Edgar Allan Poe was a southerner with a darkly metaphysical vision mixed with elements of realism, parody, and burlesque. He refined the short story genre and created detective fiction. Many of his stories foreshadow the genres of science fiction, horror, and fantasy so popular today.

# American Renaissance/ Transcendentalism (1840- 1860)

- Overview of American Renaissance/Transcendentalism
  - explores a deep mystical connection between man, nature, and the soul
  - goal of human life is to transcend the artificiality of society and the senses to experience divinity in nature and within ourselves
  - rejects Rationalists' empiricism and the Puritan's religious dogma
  - champions liberal causes such as women's suffrage and abolitionism
  - most knew each other and lived in Concord, Massachusetts
  - intuition transcends the empirical world and unifies with nature
  - views nature, God, and the collective human soul as a single entity
  - Man is not only good, he is divine and part of God's essence
  - aspired toward utopian societies
  - valued simplicity, intuition, self-reliance, and closeness to nature

# American Renaissance/ Transcendentalism (1840- 1860)

- *Genre/Style* :philosophy, non-fiction, political tracts/essays related to simplicity, individualism, self-reliance, transcendence
- *Effect/Aspects* :anecdote, metaphor, detail, analogy
- *Historical Context* :Philosophically closer to Romantics but stylistically closer to Rationalists. Followed the beliefs of Emmanuel Kant in thinking one could transcend the bonds of human existence.

# American Renaissance/ Transcendentalism (1840- 1860)

- Literary and Cultural Legacy
  - An American ideal of "returning to nature and achieving a 'transparent' or transcendent state"
  - essays of personal experience in nature as means to higher philosophical conversation
  - mystical eradication of individual self and become one with nature (God, nature, humanity)





# American Renaissance/ Transcendentalism (1840- 1860)

- Henry Wadsworth Longfellow
  - One of the most important Boston Brahmin poets was Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Longfellow, a professor of modern languages at Harvard, was the best-known American poet of his day. He was responsible for the misty, historical, legendary sense of the past that joined American and European traditions.



# American Renaissance/ Transcendentalism (1840- 1860)

- Walt Whitman
  - Born on Long Island, New York, Walt Whitman was a part-time carpenter, whose brilliant, pioneering work expressed the country's democratic spirit. Whitman was mostly self-taught, he left school at the age of 11 to go to work. *His Leaves of Grass* (1855), which he rewrote and revised throughout his life, contains "Song of Myself," the most amazingly original poem ever written by an American.

# Realism (1855-1900)

- Overview of Realism
  - Influenced by large changes in American society, like the Civil War, Industrial Revolution and the Great Migration
  - new seriousness of focus, loss of life in Civil War

# Realism (1855-1900)

- **Genre/Style** :Novels, Short Stories, Objective Narrator, and does not tell reader how to interpret the story.
- **Effect/Aspects** :Social and Aesthetic realism, a yearning for a return to reality and ordinary life.
  - a new seriousness of focus, new objective and impartial focus : truth, reality, and accuracy of the utmost importance
  - rejected Romantic ideas of beauty and the sublime in favor of authenticity and actuality
- **Historical Context** :Civil War brought demand for a more true type of literature, a language that could encompass the pain and very real violence people experienced.

# Realism (1855-1900)

- Literary and Cultural legacy
  - produced writers who are seen as the first “American” novelists
  - associated with a movement called “local color” when people attempted to capture the dialect, customs, culture, and geography of specific areas
  - (Local color writers tended to write entirely with rural settings-realists not as much)
  - character rather than plot driven narrative - the character and morals of the characters most important to determining plot and consequences of actions
  - emphasis on “common man” “everyman”

# Naturalism (1855-1900)

- **Overview**
  - scientifically-motivated literary movement
  - outgrowth of Realism, but eschewed artistic strategies in favor of scientific analysis, creating a bleaker take on realism
  - heavily focused on social problems and the larger natural, biological, and psychological forces that create those problems
  - Reaction against Romanticism in that naturalism viewed all of humanity's actions as predetermined by inanimate scientific forces
  - rejection of the idea of free will and emphasis on idea of determinism (all events determined by causes external to the will)

# Naturalism (1855-1900)

- **Overview**

- Naturalism, like Realism, developed out of the turmoil of the Civil War and the immediate postwar years. However, while Realism sought to give a truthful, objective account of everyday life, Naturalism took that approach one step further by emphasizing the impersonal scientific forces that cause all events in the world.

# Naturalism (1855-1900)

- Naturalist writers often relied on the use of environmental forces like storms or the sea to convey their message of the power of nature over man
- characters often born into poverty, childhood and environment are often portrayed as having irreversible effects on characters
- fate and chance rather than free will (as Realists preferred)
- rationality downplayed in favor of passions like greed, lust, desire for power that overwhelm and deprive choice and agency





# Realism (1855-1900)

- Mark Twain
  - Samuel Clemens, also known by his pen name of Mark Twain, grew up in the Mississippi River frontier town of Hannibal, Missouri. Ernest Hemingway's well-known statement, that all of American literature comes from one great book: Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*; shows Twain's high place in the tradition. Twain's style, based on strong, realistic, everyday American speech, gave American writers a new appreciation for their national voice. Twain was the first major author to come from the heart of the country, and he captured its distinctive and humorous slang and iconoclasm.



# Realism (1855-1900)

- Jack London
  - Jack London was a poor, self-taught worker from California. He, also a naturalist, became instantly famous from his first collection of stories, *The Son of the Wolf* (1900), set mainly in the Klondike region of Alaska and the Canadian Yukon.

# The Moderns (1915-1945)

- Overview of The Moderns
  - Overall sense of disillusionment, loss of faith in humanity, and conviction that civilization is disintegrating
  - reaction to the general crisis brought on by WWI

# The Moderns (1900-1945)

- **Genre/Style** :Novels, Plays, Poetry, experiments in writing styles, interior monologue, and stream of consciousness (as means to "truth" of the individual), "newness", fragmentation/non-linear narratives, sensory imagery and importance of language
- **Effect/Aspects** :Pursuit of American Dream, Admiration for America vs. abuse of authority, Pessimism and Optimism, and Individual Importance. belief that art can be isolated from everything, including society, culture, and environment.
  - break from previous literary norms and customs (parallel to break with belief in the necessity, supremacy, efficacy of tradition and social norms)
  - flawed characters, relatable and human, dismantle traditional ideas of gender roles, sexuality, "place" in society

# The Moderns (1900-1945)

- **Historical Context** :Writers reflected the ideas of Darwin and Karl Marx, during WWI and WWII. The Russian Revolution, World War I, the Great Depression, and the effects of Charles Darwin *On the Origin of Species* changed everything. Scientific and technological innovations happened at previously unimagined rates and introduced possibilities before unimaginable, bringing about a rapid transformation of society. Increasing confidence in Freud, Jung, and psychotherapy interplay with literary efforts towards character, inner world, human archetypes, and search for individual truth.

# The Moderns (1900-1945)

- Literary and Cultural Legacy (this one's for you Eric)
  - The Existential Crisis
    - viewed modernity as something of a crisis and much of the writing reflects this concern
      - » sense of disillusionment with the new world order and to lament for parts of the old world believed to be lost
      - » feelings of disassociation with cultural framework
      - » search for truth or meaning
        - » truth is impossible, only meaning is the journey (existence) itself
        - » absolute truth a lie (or at least intangible) each must find personal concept of truth (makes way for post-moderns)



# The Moderns (1900-1950)

- T.S. Eliot
  - Thomas Stearns Eliot was born in St. Louis, Missouri, to a wealthy family with ancestry in the northeastern United States. He received the best education of any major American writer of his generation at Harvard College, the Sorbonne, and Merton College of Oxford University. He studied Sanskrit and Oriental philosophy, which influenced his poetry.



# The Moderns (1900-1950)

- Ernest Hemingway
  - Ernest Hemingway came from the Midwest United States. He was Born in Illinois and spent childhood vacations in Michigan on hunting and fishing trips. He volunteered for an ambulance unit in France during World War I, but was wounded and hospitalized for six months. After the war, working as a war correspondent based in Paris, he met expatriate American writers Sherwood Anderson, Ezra Pound, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Gertrude Stein. Stein, in particular, influenced his spare style.



# Jazz Age (1920s)

- Overview of Jazz Age and "The Lost Generation"
- **Effect/Aspects** :more permissive attitude in France allowed exploration of radical Modernist ideas without fear of ridicule or retaliation
- **Historical Context** :brief, decade-long blip of optimism, new era of prosperity began in the U.S. and Americans took full advantage. Paris was the epicenter of literary life and many American took advantage: Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Gertrude Stein

# Harlem Renaissance (1920s)

- Overview of Harlem Renaissance
- **Genre/Style** :Blues Song in Poetry and African American Spirituals.
- **Effect/Aspects** :Brought about Gospel Music.
- **Historical Context** :Mass African American Migration to Northern Urban Centers. African Americans are given more access to media and publishing. Dissatisfaction with previous American values created opportunity for more voices to be heard, and Americans were interested in learning from each other in arts, literature, and culture. People who had fought for the country in WWI also felt a sense of belonging and ownership that gave them confidence to press for a voice, recognition, and presence in "A"merican identity

# Harlem Renaissance (1920s)

- Ralph Waldo Ellison
  - Born in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, Ellison achieved international recognition for his first novel, *Invisible Man* (1952). He was influenced by his thinking of the United States as a land of "infinite possibilities." He attended the Tuskegee institute to pursue a career in music but found that he was more interested in writing.



# Harlem Renaissance (1920s)

- Jessie Redmon Fauset
  - Ms Fauset was the literary editor of the magazine *Crisis*. She edited and contributed regularly to *The Brownies Book* which was the children's version of the *Crisis*.

# Contemporary Period (1940s-Present)

- Overview of Contemporary Period
- **Genre/Style** :Narrative, fiction, nonfiction, anti heroes, emotional, irony, storytelling, autobiographical, and essays.
- **Effect/Aspects** :Shift in emphasis from homogeneity to celebrating diversity.
- **Historical Context** :New century, new millennium.

# Post-Modernism (1950 to present)

- Overview of Post Modernism
- **Genre/Style** :Mixing of fantasy with nonfiction blurred lines of reality for reader, there were no heroes, humorless, narratives, present tense, and magic realism.
- **Effect/Aspects** :Grinds down the distinctions between the classes of people.
- **Historical Context** :After WWII prosperity.



# Post-Modernism (1950 to present)

- Robert Creeley
  - Robert Creeley was one of the Black Mountain poets. He wrote with a short, minimalist style.



# Post-Modernism (1950 to present)

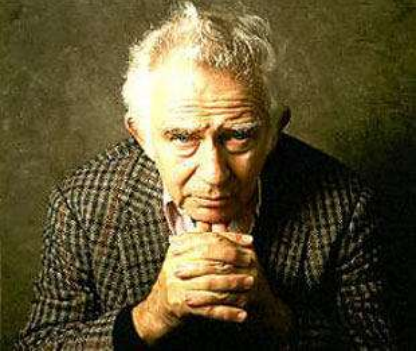
- James Dickey
  - James Dickey was a novelist, essayist, and poet. He was born in Georgia and much of his writing is about nature.



# Contemporary Period (1940s-Present)

- John Gardner

Gardner, formerly from a farming background, was the most important representative for ethical standards in literature until his death. He was a professor of English who specialized in the medieval period.



# Contemporary Period (1940s-Present)

- Norman Mailer
  - Mailer has been generally considered the representative author of modern times, being able to change his style and subject multiple times. He follows the traditions of Ernest Hemingway.

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