

CHARACTERISTICS OF LITERARY TRENDS OF AMERICAN LITERATURE

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The website “Britannica.com” gives the following definitions to American literary trends,

- The Colonial and Early National Period (17th century to 1830)

The first European settlers of North America wrote about their experiences starting in the 1600s. This was the earliest American literature: practical, straightforward, often derivative of literature in Great Britain, and focused on the future.

In its earliest days, during the 1600s, American literature consisted mostly of practical nonfiction written by British settlers who populated the colonies that would become the United States.

John Smith wrote histories of Virginia based on his experiences as an English explorer and a president of the Jamestown Colony. These histories, published in 1608 and 1624, are among the earliest works of American literature.

Nathaniel Ward and John Winthrop wrote books on religion, a topic of central concern in colonial America.

Anne Bradstreet's *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America* (1650) may be the earliest collection of poetry written in and about America, although it was published in England.

A new era began when the United States declared its independence in 1776, and much new writing addressed the country's future. American poetry and fiction were largely modeled on what was being published overseas in Great Britain, and much of what American readers consumed also came from Great Britain.

The *Federalist Papers* (1787–88), by Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, shaped the political direction of the United States.

Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*, which he wrote during the 1770s and '80s, told a quintessentially American life story.

Phillis Wheatley, an African woman enslaved in Boston, wrote the first African American book, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773). Philip Freneau was another notable poet of the era.

The first American novel, *The Power of Sympathy* by William Hill Brown, was published in 1789.

Olaudah Equiano's autobiography, *The Interesting Narrative* (1789), was among the earliest slave narratives and a forceful argument for abolition.

By the first decades of the 19th century, a truly American literature began to emerge. Though still derived from British literary tradition, the short stories and

novels published from 1800 through the 1820s began to depict American society and explore the American landscape in an unprecedented manner.

Washington Irving published the collection of short stories and essays *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.* in 1819–20. It included “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” and “Rip Van Winkle,” two of the earliest American short stories.

James Fenimore Cooper wrote novels of adventure about the frontiersman Natty Bumppo. These novels, called the *Leatherstocking Tales* (1823–41), depict his experiences in the American wilderness in both realistic and highly romanticized ways.

- The Romantic Period (1830 to 1870)

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.

Edgar Allan Poe most vividly depicted, and inhabited, the role of the Romantic individual—a genius, often tormented and always struggling against convention—during the 1830s and up to his mysterious death in 1849.

Poe invented the modern detective story with “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (1841).

The poem “The Raven” (1845) is a gloomy depiction of lost love. Its eeriness is intensified by its meter and rhyme scheme.

The short stories “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839) and “The Cask of Amontillado” (1846) are gripping tales of horror.

In New England, several different groups of writers and thinkers emerged after 1830, each exploring the experiences of individuals in different segments of American society.

James Russell Lowell was among those who used humor and dialect in verse and prose to depict everyday life in the Northeast.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Oliver Wendell Holmes were the most prominent of the upper-class Brahmins, who filtered their depiction of America through European models and sensibilities.

The Transcendentalists developed an elaborate philosophy that saw in all of creation a unified whole. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote influential essays, while Henry David Thoreau wrote *Walden* (1854), an account of his life alone by Walden Pond. Margaret Fuller was editor of *The Dial*, an important Transcendentalist magazine.

Three men—Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and Walt Whitman—began publishing novels, short stories, and poetry during the Romantic period that became some of the most-enduring works of American literature.

As a young man, Nathaniel Hawthorne published short stories, most notable among them the allegorical “Young Goodman Brown” (1835). In the 1840s he crossed

paths with the Transcendentalists before he started writing his two most significant novels—*The Scarlet Letter* (1850) and *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851).

Herman Melville was one of Hawthorne's friends and neighbors. Hawthorne was also a strong influence on Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851), which was the culmination of Melville's early life of traveling and writing.

Walt Whitman wrote poetry that described his home, New York City. He refused the traditional constraints of rhyme and meter in favor of free verse in *Leaves of Grass* (1855), and his frankness in subject matter and tone repelled some critics. But the book, which went through many subsequent editions, became a landmark in American poetry, and it epitomized the ethos of the Romantic period.

During the 1850s, as the United States headed toward civil war, more and more stories by and about enslaved and free African Americans were written.

William Wells Brown published what is considered the first black American novel, *Clotel*, in 1853. He also wrote the first African American play to be published, *The Escape* (1858).

In 1859 Frances Ellen Watkins Harper and Harriet E. Wilson became the first black women to publish fiction in the United States.

Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, first published serially 1851–52, is credited with raising opposition in the North to slavery.

Emily Dickinson lived a life quite unlike other writers of the Romantic period: she lived largely in seclusion; only a handful of her poems were published before her death in 1886; and she was a woman working at a time when men dominated the literary scene. Yet her poems express a Romantic vision as clearly as Walt Whitman's or Edgar Allan Poe's. They are sharp-edged and emotionally intense. Five of her notable poems are

"I'm Nobody! Who are you?"

"Because I could not stop for Death –"

"My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun"

"A Bird, came down the Walk –"

"Safe in their Alabaster Chambers"

• Realism and Naturalism (1870 to 1910)

The human cost of the Civil War in the United States was immense: more than 2.3 million soldiers fought in the war, and perhaps as many as 851,000 people died in 1861–65. Walt Whitman claimed that "a great literature will...arise out of the era of those four years," and what emerged in the following decades was a literature that presented a detailed and unembellished vision of the world as it truly was. This was the essence of realism. Naturalism was an intensified form of realism. After the grim realities of a devastating war, they became writers' primary mode of expression.

Samuel Clemens was a typesetter, a journalist, a riverboat captain, and an itinerant laborer before he became, in 1863 at age 27, Mark Twain. He first used that name while reporting on politics in the Nevada Territory. It then appeared on the short

story “The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County,” published in 1865, which catapulted him to national fame. Twain’s story was a humorous tall tale, but its characters were realistic depictions of actual Americans. Twain deployed this combination of humor and realism throughout his writing. Some of his notable works include

Major novels: *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876), *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885)

Travel narratives: *The Innocents Abroad* (1869), *Roughing It* (1872), *Life on the Mississippi* (1883)

Short stories: “*Jim Baker’s Blue-Jay Yarn*” (1880), “*The Man that Corrupted Hadleyburg*” (1899)

Naturalism, like realism, was a literary movement that drew inspiration from French authors of the 19th century who sought to document, through fiction, the reality that they saw around them, particularly among the middle and working classes living in cities.

Theodore Dreiser was foremost among American writers who embraced naturalism. His *Sister Carrie* (1900) is the most important American naturalist novel.

Maggie: A Girl of the Streets (1893) and *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), by Stephen Crane, and *McTeague* (1899), *The Octopus* (1901), and *The Pit* (1903), by Frank Norris, are novels that vividly depict the reality of urban life, war, and capitalism.

Paul Laurence Dunbar was an African American writer who wrote poetry in black dialect—“*Possum*,” “*When de Co’n Pone’s Hot*”—that were popular with his white audience and gave them what they believed was reality for black Americans. Dunbar also wrote poems not in dialect—“*We Wear the Mask*,” “*Sympathy*”—that exposed the reality of racism in America during Reconstruction and afterward.

Henry James shared the view of the realists and naturalists that literature ought to present reality, but his writing style and use of literary form sought to also create an aesthetic experience, not simply document truth. He was preoccupied with the clash in values between the United States and Europe. His writing shows features of both 19th-century realism and naturalism and 20th-century modernism. Some of his notable novels are

The American (1877)

The Portrait of a Lady (1881)

What Maisie Knew (1897)

The Wings of the Dove (1902)

The Golden Bowl (1904)

• *The Modernist Period* (1910 to 1945)

Advances in science and technology in Western countries rapidly intensified at the start of the 20th century and brought about a sense of unprecedented progress. The devastation of World War I and the Great Depression also caused widespread

suffering in Europe and the United States. These contradictory impulses can be found swirling within modernism, a movement in the arts defined first and foremost as a radical break from the past. But this break was often an act of destruction, and it caused a loss of faith in traditional structures and beliefs. Despite, or perhaps because of, these contradictory impulses, the modernist period proved to be one of the richest and most productive in American literature.

A sense of disillusionment and loss pervades much American modernist fiction. That sense may be centered on specific individuals, or it may be directed toward American society or toward civilization generally. It may generate a nihilistic, destructive impulse, or it may express hope at the prospect of change.

F. Scott Fitzgerald skewered the American Dream in *The Great Gatsby* (1925).

Richard Wright exposed and attacked American racism in *Native Son* (1940).

Zora Neale Hurston told the story of a black woman's three marriages in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937).

Ernest Hemingway's early novels *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) and *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) articulated the disillusionment of the Lost Generation.

Willa Cather told hopeful stories of the American frontier, set mostly on the Great Plains, in *O Pioneers!* (1913) and *My Ántonia* (1918).

William Faulkner used stream-of-consciousness monologues and other formal techniques to break from past literary practice in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929).

John Steinbeck depicted the difficult lives of migrant workers in *Of Mice and Men* (1937) and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939).

T.S. Eliot was an American by birth and, as of 1927, a British subject by choice. His fragmentary, multivoiced *The Waste Land* (1922) is the quintessential modernist poem, but his was not the dominant voice among American modernist poets.

Robert Frost and Carl Sandburg evocatively described the regions—New England and the Midwest, respectively—in which they lived.

The Harlem Renaissance produced a rich coterie of poets, among them Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, and Alice Dunbar Nelson. *The Dead* (1948), *The Executioner's Song* (1979)

Vladimir Nabokov: *Lolita* (1955)

Jack Kerouac: *On the Road* (1957)

Thomas Pynchon: *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966)

Kurt Vonnegut: *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969)

Eudora Welty: *The Optimist's Daughter* (1972)

Philip Roth: *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969), *American Pastoral* (1997)

Ursula K. Le Guin: *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969)

Saul Bellow: *Humboldt's Gift* (1975)

Toni Morrison: *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Beloved* (1987)

Alice Walker: *The Color Purple* (1982)

Sandra Cisneros: *The House on Mango Street* (1983)

Jamaica Kincaid: *Annie John* (1984)

Maxine Hong Kingston: *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* (1989)

David Foster Wallace: *Infinite Jest* (1996)

Don DeLillo: *Underworld* (1997)

Ha Jin: *Waiting* (1999)

Jonathan Franzen: *The Corrections* (2001)

Junot Díaz: *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007)

Colson Whitehead: *The Underground Railroad* (2016)

The Beat movement was short-lived—starting and ending in the 1950s—but had a lasting influence on American poetry during the contemporary period. Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl* (1956) pushed aside the formal, largely traditional poetic conventions that had come to dominate American poetry. Raucous, profane, and deeply moving, *Howl* reset Americans’ expectations for poetry during the second half of the 20th century and beyond. Among the important poets of this period are

Anne Sexton

Sylvia Plath

John Berryman

Donald Hall

Elizabeth Bishop

James Merrill

Nikki Giovanni

Robert Pinsky

Adrienne Rich

Rita Dove

Yusef Komunyakaa

W.S. Merwin

Tracy K. Smith

In the early decades of the contemporary period, American drama was dominated by three men: Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, and Edward Albee. Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* (1949) questioned the American Dream through the destruction of its main character, while Williams’s *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955) excavated his characters’ dreams and frustrations. Albee’s *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962) rendered what might have been a benign domestic situation into something vicious and cruel. By the 1970s the face of American drama had begun to change, and it continued to diversify into the 21st century. Notable dramatists include

David Mamet

Amiri Baraka

Sam Shepard

August Wilson

Ntozake Shange

Wendy Wasserstein

Tony Kushner

David Henry Hwang

Richard Greenberg

Suzan-Lori Parks

Harriet Monroe founded Poetry magazine in Chicago in 1912 and made it the most important organ for poetry not just in the United States but for the English-speaking world.

During the 1920s Edna St. Vincent Millay, Marianne Moore, and E.E. Cummings expressed a spirit of revolution and experimentation in their poetry.

Drama came to prominence for the first time in the United States in the early 20th century. Playwrights drew inspiration from European theater but created plays that were uniquely and enduringly American.

Eugene O'Neill was the foremost American playwright of the period. His *Long Day's Journey into Night* (written 1939–41, performed 1956) was the high point of more than 20 years of creativity that began in 1920 with *Beyond the Horizon* and concluded with *The Iceman Cometh* (written 1939, performed 1946).

During the 1930s Lillian Hellman, Clifford Odets, and Langston Hughes wrote plays that exposed injustice in America.

Thornton Wilder presented a realistic (and enormously influential) vision of small-town America in *Our Town*, first produced in 1938.

- The Contemporary Period (1945 to present)

The United States, which emerged from World War II confident and economically strong, entered the Cold War in the late 1940s. This conflict with the Soviet Union shaped global politics for more than four decades, and the proxy wars and threat of nuclear annihilation that came to define it were just some of the influences shaping American literature during the second half of the 20th century. The 1950s and '60s brought significant cultural shifts within the United States driven by the civil rights movement and the women's movement. Prior to the last decades of the 20th century, American literature was largely the story of dead white men who had created Art and of living white men doing the same. By the turn of the 21st century, American literature had become a much more complex and inclusive story grounded on a wide-ranging body of past writings produced in the United States by people of different backgrounds and open to more Americans in the present day.