

US LITERATURE

COLONIAL PERIOD (16TH CENTURY – 1760)

The earliest American literature dates to the 16th century when the first European settlers started to write about their experience in the New World. At the time, any texts sent back to Europe were regulated, so that people still living on the continent would not be discouraged by negative comments from visiting or moving to new colonies.

Captain John Smith (1580-1631) is recognised as the "first American writer". He was the founder of the first successful colony in Jamestown, Virginia (established in 1607). Smith's literary work focused primarily on Native Americans. The Powhatan tribe captured Smith but he was spared and released thanks to Pocahontas (real name was Matoaka), the tribal chief's 13-year-old daughter. Therefore, Smith is the one behind the story of Pocahontas.

Puritans who emigrated to North America (New England) in 1636 were a group of 17,000 English Protestants. They sought to simplify the Church and return to pure faith in God. They followed the Bible word by word and believed that the more you suffer here on the Earth, the better life comes after death. They did not do things to have fun, they did not wear nice clothing or jewellery. Moreover, they did not listen to music, did not drink alcohol and did not gamble. For that reason, the literature of this period does not focus on entertainment. It was plain in style but practical and straightforward and it focused on the settlers' future in the US. As for the genre, there was an absence of drama and novels, but people wrote chronicles, diaries, journals and about history. Puritans were well-educated people; everybody had to learn how to read and write in order to be able to study the Bible. The puritans established the 1st US university – *Harvard*.

REVOLUTIONARY PERIOD (1760 – 1800)

The colonial period in literature ends with the French surrendering to Britain when fighting over territories in North America. The Revolutionary Era in American history and literature is marked by the United States declaring **independence from Britain**. These ancestors of the first British settlers started to feel that their rights and civil liberties were abused. This was a time of British imperialism and expansion, but also of their control over American society. Therefore, the literature was mainly of political nature: pamphlets, political poems, songs, essays,...

Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790) was a philosopher, scientist, printer, editor, statesman as well as one of America's first significant diplomats in France. Together with Hugh Meredith, he was the owner of *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, which was one of the United States' most prominent newspapers from 1728. Benjamin Franklin also served as the editor of the *Declaration of Independence*. An interesting fact: he was not allowed to actually write it because people were worried that he would sneak in bad jokes! He was sort of a prankster and known for putting subtle jokes in many of his texts. His autobiography is both a significant historical document and Franklin's main literary work. It was the first autobiography to achieve widespread popularity.

Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826) was a diplomat, lawyer, architect, musician, philosopher and also a statesman. He was the main author of the *Declaration of Independence*, declaring the freedom of the thirteen American colonies from Great Britain, adopted at the Second Continental Congress on 4 July 1776. He was critical of changes to the document, particularly the removal of a long paragraph that attributed responsibility of the slave trade to British King George III (1738-1820). To this day, the Declaration of Independence presents one of the most important documents in US history. Together with Franklin, they were amongst the seven Founding Fathers of the United States.

ROMANTICISM (1800 - 1840)

In the 19th century, national literature appears. Sensitivity, love of nature, interest in the past and in exotic places, mysticism and individualism are present in the literature of that time.

Washington Irving (1783-1859) was a historian and a diplomat as well as a writer. He wrote on the topic of American society: the history of New York and short stories and essays about American life. He is the author of the biography of the first president of the United States (1789 to 1797), **George Washington**. *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* is a gothic story from one of his collections. He wrote it while he was living abroad in Birmingham, England. The story is one of the earliest examples of US fiction with enduring popularity, especially during Halloween as it is quite spooky.

James Fenimore Cooper (1789-1851) was a novelist and intellectual. He also published several pamphlets and articles. Cooper spent part of his life living with his family in Europe. In his works, he described the American wilderness but also wrote about adventures abroad. His novel *The Spy* brought him international fame and a certain amount of wealth. Another novel of his, called *The Last of the Mohicans* and set during the French and Indian War, is believed to be a romantic masterpiece.

Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) was a poet, short story writer, critical essayist and founder of science-fiction and detective stories. His works mainly explored themes of death, regret and lost love. *The Raven* is probably one of Poe's most famous poems. It is set during a stormy night when a tired student who has lost his love asks if he will ever meet her again in some other world. His doubts are underlined by the raven's repetition of 'nevermore'. His most famous short stories include *The Black Cat*, *The Pit and the Pendulum*, *The Fall of the House of Usher* and *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*. *The Philosophy of Composition* is Poe's well-known essay in which he explains how he came to write *The Raven*.

RENAISSANCE (1840 - 1860)

Renaissance marks the period before one of the most important events in US history – the Civil War (1861-1865). Boston and Harvard University (then part of New England, now in the state of Massachusetts) were the cultural centres at the time.

Transcendentalism was a literary and philosophical movement that expressed a protest against the state of culture and society and a belief in the ideal spiritual state that transcends the physical and empirical and is realised by intuition. It combined respect for nature and self-sufficiency with elements of *Unitarianism* and *German Romanticism*. **Ralph Waldo Emerson** (1803-1882) and **Henry David Thoreau** (1817-1862) were American essayists, philosophers and poets. They were part of the transcendentalist movement and wrote about the importance of intuition, romanticism, idealism, individualism, democracy and freedom.

Herman Melville (1819-1891) was an American novelist, short-story writer and poet of the American Renaissance period. He had many jobs throughout his life and visited a lot of places. He is also a representative of symbolism, which was reflected in his most successful literary piece *Moby Dick*: white whale = mysterious nature, sea voyage = life, crew = humanity. The novel is about Captain Ahab and his obsession with a huge sperm whale, Moby Dick. The whale caused the loss of Ahab's leg years before and now Ahab seeks his revenge.

Mark Twain (1835-1910) was an American writer, humorist, entrepreneur, publisher and lecturer. He is the representative of the so-called **comic realism** because in his works he turned to his native land for resources and presented the untypical use of the English language. Twain experimented with the language and investigated the slang and dialects present in his environment. His American characters, problems and situations are drowned with vividness and familiarity. His real name was Samuel Langhorne Clemens. His other important novels are *The Prince and the Pauper* (set in Renaissance England during the reign of Edward VI), *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

REALISM AND NATURALISM (2ND HALF OF THE 19TH CENTURY)

This period is known for significant social differences between the rich and the poor, rapid industrialisation and immigration and the development of cities.

Henry James (1843-1916) is regarded as a key transitional figure between literary realism and literary modernism and considered by many to be among the greatest novelists in the English language. He was the founder of American psychological novels such as *The Portrait of a Lady* and *What Maisie Knew*.

Upton Sinclair's (1878-1968) most well-known book is *The Jungle* with elements of naturalism. It is a report on the labour conditions in the Chicago meatpacking industry, which later helped to improve food laws in the USA. He was a writer as well as a political activist. Several of Sinclair's other novels were banned due to their explicit language.

Jack London (1876-1916) was an American novelist, journalist and social activist. He had little education. *White Fang* is another of London's novels and the name of the book's eponymous character, a wild wolfdog. It is written from the wolfdog's viewpoint, enabling London to explore how animals view their world and how they view humans. The novel examines the violent world of wild animals and the equally violent world of humans. The book also explores complex themes including morality and redemption. A short adventure novel of London's called *The Call of the Wild* is set in Canada, during the 1890s **Klondike Gold Rush**, when strong sled dogs were in high demand. The central character of the novel is another dog, a dog named Buck.

Theodore Dreiser (1871-1945) was an American novelist and journalist of the naturalist school. His novels often featured main characters who succeeded at their objectives despite a lack of a firm moral code. His best works include *Sister Carrie* and *An American tragedy*. The first novel is about a young woman who moves to the big city where she starts realizing her own American Dream. She first becomes a mistress to men that she perceives as superior, but later becomes a famous actress. In the second novel, the protagonist is the negative character who becomes a murderer, yet it is not him who is to blame but the society and the system that have failed him. The main character Clyde is then imprisoned and executed in an electric chair.

POETRY IN THE 19TH CENTURY

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882) was an American poet and educator whose works include *Paul Revere's Ride*, *The Song of Hiawatha* and *Evangeline*. He was the first American to translate **Dante Alighieri's** *Divine Comedy* and was one of the fireside poets, also known as *the schoolroom* or *household poets*. They were a group of 19th-century American poets associated with New England. These poets were very popular among readers and critics both in the US and abroad.

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) was little-known during her life but has since been regarded as one of the most important figures in American poetry. Her poems were unique for her era. They contain short lines, typically lack titles, and often use slant rhyme as well as unconventional capitalisation and punctuation. Many of her poems deal with themes of death and immortality and also explore aesthetics, society, nature and spirituality. The most famous poem by Dickinson, *Hope is the Thing with Feathers* is ranked among the greatest poems in the English language. It metaphorically describes hope as a bird that rests in the soul, sings continuously and never demands anything even in the direst circumstances.

Walt Whitman (1819-1892) was a poet of democracy, freedom, nature, love and friendship. He freed American poetry from the influence of European poetry. Whitman influenced modern poetry with a rhythmical free verse which was his own invention. His most celebrated poetry collection is called *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman chose his idealised self as the subject of the collection and created the personality of the proletarian bard—the supposed writer of the poems. Whitman was so popular that 1,000 people came to his funeral.

THE 1920S (THE LOST GENERATION)

The 1920s presented the Jazz Age (jazz, charleston,...) but it was also a decade of disillusionment left behind by *WWI*. People wanted to have fun in order to forget the war. There was a sense of loss, ex-soldiers were unable to settle down in America, but also a complex of inferiority. Literature was very innovative and full of new techniques (e.g. montage). Old literary traditions were rejected.

Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961) was an American novelist, short-story writer and journalist. During *WWI* he was a Red Cross ambulance driver and got injured. After the war, he spent several years in Paris leading a bohemian lifestyle. In the 1930s he participated as a war correspondent in the *Spanish Civil War* and did the same during *WWII*. After surviving *WWII* he went travelling and lived in Cuba. He suffered from health issues at the end of his life and was unable to write. He committed suicide. His economical and understated style, which he termed the iceberg theory, had a strong influence on 20th-century fiction. He was awarded the 1954 **Nobel Prize in Literature**. His most famous works include *A Farewell to Arms* (an autobiographical novel set during *WWI*), *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (a novel about the Spanish Civil War) and *The Old Man and the Sea* (a short novel about a man's struggle with the forces of nature).

Francis Scott Fitzgerald (1896-1940) was an American novelist, essayist, screenwriter and short-story writer. His highly popular novels depict the flamboyance and excess of the Jazz Age. Nonetheless, Fitzgerald only received critical acclaim after his death. He is now widely regarded as one of the greatest American writers of the 20th century. Fitzgerald published *The Great Gatsby* in 1925. It is a love story portraying and criticising the upper class' hypocrisy.

THE 1930S

1930s are said to be a hangover from the entertaining 1920s due to *the Great Depression* which came after the stock market crash of October 29, 1929 (also known as Black Tuesday).

John Steinbeck (1902-1968) was a realist writer of political protest and 1962 Nobel Prize for Literature winner. He is widely known for the comic novels *Tortilla Flat* and *Cannery Row*, the multi-generation epic *East of Eden* and the novellas *The Red Pony* and *Of Mice and Men*. Most of Steinbeck's work is set in central California. His works frequently explored the themes of fate and injustice, especially as applied to downtrodden or everyman protagonists. The Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Grapes of Wrath* written in 1939 is considered Steinbeck's masterpiece and part of the American literary canon. The realist novel describes the period of *the Great Depression*. It is about a poor family which is exploited by the fruit-growers in California.

AUTHORS WRITING ABOUT WWII

William Styron – *Sophie's Choice* (set in New York and Auschwitz)

Norman Mailer – *The Naked and the Dead* (based on Mailer's own experience of military service in the Philippines)

Kurt Vonnegut – *Slaughterhouse-Five* (a science fiction infused anti-war novel)

Joseph Heller – *Catch-22* (a darkly comic novel that became a universal metaphor for the insanity of war and the madness of life itself)

THE 1950S AND 1960S

The Beat Generation was a 1950s literary movement started by a group of authors whose work explored and influenced American culture and politics in the post-war era. They rejected mainstream American values and explicitly portrayed sex and drug experiments. **Allen Ginsberg's** (1926-1997) *Howl*, **William S. Burroughs'** (1914-1997) *Naked Lunch* and **Jack Kerouac's** (1922-1969) *On the Road* are among the best-known examples of Beat literature.

John Updike (1932-2009) was an American novelist, poet, short-story writer, art critic and literary critic. One of only four writers to win the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction more than once. His most famous work is his *Rabbit* series (the novels *Rabbit, Run*; *Rabbit Redux*; *Rabbit Is Rich*; *Rabbit at Rest*; and the novella *Rabbit Remembered*), which chronicles the life of the middle-class everyman Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom over the course of several decades, from young adulthood to death.

J. D. Salinger (1919-2010) was an American writer best known for his 1951 novel *The Catcher in the Rye*. It is a book about protesting / non-conformism; it reflects the feelings and thinking of a young generation and the feeling of revolt against a fixed order.

Ken Kesey (1935-2001) was an American novelist, essayist and countercultural figure. He considered himself a link between the Beat Generation of the 1950s and the hippies of the 1960s. *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* is a novel, which is a tribute to individualistic principles and set in a psychiatric clinic in Oregon. The novel was an immediate commercial and critical success.

POETRY IN THE 20TH CENTURY

Imagism was a movement in early-20th-century Anglo-American poetry that favoured precision of imagery and clear, sharp language. The importance was placed on images. Writers were not writing words unnecessarily, hence it was a very economical style. It is considered to be the first organised modernist literary movement in the English language. A representative of this literary movement is **Ezra Pound** (1885-1972) and his long and incomplete poem *The Cantos*. A canto is a principal form of division in medieval and modern long poetry.

T. S. Eliot (1888-1965) was greatly influenced by the Imagism movement and sometimes he is mentioned as being part of it. Eliot was a poet, essayist, publisher, playwright, literary critic and editor. Considered one of the 20th century's major poets, he is a central figure in English-language Modernist poetry. His poem *The Waste Land* was published in 1922 and has 434-lines. Eliot's poem combines the legend of the *Holy Grail* and the *Fisher King* with vignettes of contemporary British society. Eliot employs many literary and cultural allusions from the Western canon such as **Dante's** *Divine Comedy* and **Shakespeare**, Buddhism and Hinduism.

Modernism (1914-1945) began as an extension of realism but made efforts to break with literary and poetic traditions. Authors of this era were bold and experimental in style; an example of this being the "stream of consciousness".

Edward Estlin Cummings (1894-1962) is often styled as e e cummings. Cummings was an American poet, painter, essayist, author and playwright. He wrote approximately 2,900 poems. He is associated with modernist *free-form poetry*. Many of his poems are sonnets, albeit often with a modern twist and also often rife with satire. In his work, E.E. Cummings didn't use capital letters, proper punctuation or proper grammar. He used this to his advantage in mixing the message into the poem, e.g. "&", "is 5", "1 x 1".

AMERICAN DRAMA IN THE 20TH CENTURY

Eugene O'Neill (1888-1953) was an American playwright, Nobel laureate in literature and nicknamed "a master of tragedy". His poetically titled plays were among the first to introduce into the U.S. the drama techniques of realism earlier associated with European playwrights. *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931) is a trilogy (play cycle) largely inspired by Aeschylus's *Oresteia* (where Electra is condemned to a life of mourning the disasters that befall her family) but it is set in a Puritan New England town at the end of the Civil War.

Arthur Miller (1915-2005) was an American playwright and essayist. He wrote *Death of a Salesman* (1949), which is an emotional and psychological drama about women and the South. It is a two-act tragedy set in 1940s New York told through a montage of memories, dreams, and arguments of the protagonist. His other popular plays include *All My Sons*, *The Crucible* and *A View from the Bridge*.

Tennessee Williams (1911-1983) was an American playwright, screenwriter and one of the foremost playwrights of 20th-century American drama. Williams suddenly became famous at 33 with the success of *The Glass Menagerie* (1944). This play closely reflected his own unhappy family background. Other of his well-known plays are *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), *Sweet Bird of Youth* (1959) and *The Night of the Iguana* (1961).

AFRICAN-AMERICAN WRITERS

Toni Morrison (1931-2019) was an American novelist, essayist, book editor and college professor. *The Bluest Eye* (1970) was Morrison's first novel, set in 1941. It is about a young African-American girl who grew up following the Great Depression. Pecola is always regarded as "ugly" due to her mannerisms and dark skin. As a result, she develops an inferiority complex, which fuels her desire for the blue eyes she equates with "whiteness". Morrison's other famous novel, *Beloved* (1987), is set after the Civil War and tells the story of a family of former slaves whose home is haunted by a malevolent spirit.

Alice Walker (1944-present) is an American novelist, short-story writer, poet and social activist. She published the novel *The Color Purple* (1982), which won her the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. Her other novels include *Meridian* (1976) and *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970).

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (1977-present) is a Nigerian novelist and short-stories writer. She also writes non-fiction and was described as a prominent writer. Her second home is the United States. Adichie is a feminist and has written the novels *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) and *Americanah* (2013), the short story collection *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2009) and the book-length essay *We Should All Be Feminists* (2014).