

American Novel

Introduction:

With the War of 1812 and an increasing desire to produce uniquely American literature and culture, a number of key new literary figures emerged, perhaps most prominently Washington Irving, William Cullen Bryant, and James Fenimore Cooper. Irving, often considered the first writer to develop a unique American style (although this has been debated) wrote humorous works in *Salmagundi* and the satire *A History of New York, by Diedrich Knickerbocker* (1809). Bryant wrote early romantic and nature-inspired poetry, which evolved away from their European origins.

Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales* about Natty Bumppo (which includes *The Last of the Mohicans*) were popular both in the new country and abroad. In 1832, Edgar Allan Poe began writing short stories – including "The Masque of the Red Death", "The Pit and the Pendulum", "The Fall of the House of Usher", and "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" – that explore previously hidden levels of human psychology and push the boundaries of fiction toward mystery and fantasy.

Humorous writers were also popular and included Seba Smith and Benjamin Penhallow Shillaber in New England and Davy Crockett, Augustus Baldwin Longstreet, Johnson J. Hooper, Thomas Bangs Thorpe, and George Washington Harris writing about the American frontier.

The New England Brahmins were a group of writers connected to Harvard University and its seat in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The core included James Russell Lowell, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr.

In 1836, Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882), an ex-minister, published a startling nonfiction work called *Nature*, in which he claimed it was possible to dispense with organized religion and reach a lofty spiritual state by studying and responding to the natural world. His work influenced not only the writers who gathered around him,

forming a movement known as Transcendentalism, but also the public, who heard him lecture.

Emerson's most gifted fellow-thinker was perhaps Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862), a resolute nonconformist. After living mostly by himself for two years in a cabin by a wooded pond, Thoreau wrote *Walden*, a book-length memoir that urges resistance to the meddling dictates of organized society. His radical writings express a deep-rooted tendency toward individualism in the American character. Other writers influenced by Transcendentalism were Bronson Alcott, Margaret Fuller, George Ripley, Orestes Brownson, and Jones Very.^[10]

Just as one of the great works of the Revolutionary period was written by a Frenchman, so too was one of the great works about America from this generation, viz., Alexis de Tocqueville's two-volume *Democracy in America*, which (like the colonial explorers) described his travels through the young country, making observations about the relations between democracy, liberty, equality, individualism and community.

The political conflict surrounding abolitionism inspired the writings of William Lloyd Garrison and his paper *The Liberator*, along with poet John Greenleaf Whittier and Harriet Beecher Stowe in her world-famous *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. These efforts were supported by the continuation of the slave narrative autobiography, of which the best known examples from this period include Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.

At the same time, Native American autobiography develops, most notably in William Apess's *A Son of the Forest* and George Copway's *The Life, History and Travels of Kah-ge-gah-bowh*. Moreover, minority authors were beginning to publish fiction, as in William Wells Brown's *Clotel; or, The President's Daughter*, Frank J. Webb's *The Garies and Their Friends*, Martin Delany's *Blake; or, The Huts of America* and Harriet E. Wilson's *Our Nig* as early African American novels, and John Rollin Ridge's *The Life and Adventures of Joaquin Murieta: The Celebrated California Bandit*, which is

considered the first Native American novel but which also is an early story about Mexican American issues.

In 1837, the young Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804–1864) collected some of his stories as *Twice-Told Tales*, a volume rich in symbolism and occult incidents. Hawthorne went on to write full-length "romances", quasi-allegorical novels that explore such themes as guilt, pride, and emotional repression in his native New England. His masterpiece, *The Scarlet Letter*, is the stark drama of a woman cast out of her community for committing adultery.

Hawthorne's fiction had a profound impact on his friend Herman Melville (1819–1891), 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 becomes 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 20th century.

Anti-transcendental works from Melville, Hawthorne, and Poe all comprise the Dark Romanticism subgenre of literature popular during this time.

Mark Twain (the pen name used by Samuel Langhorne Clemens, 1835–1910) was the first major American writer to be born away from the East Coast – in the border state of Missouri. His regional masterpieces were the memoir *Life on the Mississippi* and the novels *Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Twain's style – influenced by journalism, wedded to the vernacular, direct and unadorned but also highly evocative and irreverently humorous – changed the way Americans write their language. His characters speak like real people and sound distinctively American, using local dialects, newly invented words, and regional accents.

Henry James (1843–1916) confronted the Old World-New World dilemma by writing directly about it. Although born in New York City, he spent most of his adult years in England. Many of his novels center on Americans who live in or travel to Europe. With its intricate, highly qualified sentences and dissection of emotional and psychological nuance, James's fiction can be daunting. Among his more accessible works are the novellas *Daisy Miller*, about an enchanting American girl in Europe, and *The Turn of the Screw*, an enigmatic ghost story.

Realism also influenced American drama of the period, in part through the works of Howells but also through the works of such Europeans as Ibsen and Zola. Although realism was most influential in terms of set design and staging—audiences loved the special effects offered up by the popular melodramas—and in the growth of local color plays, it also showed up in the more subdued, less romantic tone that reflected the effects of the Civil War and continued social turmoil on the American psyche.

The most ambitious attempt at bringing modern realism into the drama was James Herne's *Margaret Fleming*, which addressed issues of social determinism through realistic dialogue, psychological insight and symbolism; the play was not a success, as critics and audiences alike felt it dwelt too much on unseemly topics and included improper scenes, such as the main character nursing her husband's illegitimate child onstage.