

# **American Literature**

## **American Romanticism (1828–1865)**

Also known as the Romantic Period in America and the Age of Transcendentalism, this period is commonly accepted to be the greatest of American literature. Major writers include Walt Whitman, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe, and Herman Melville. Emerson, Thoreau, and Margaret Fuller are credited with shaping the literature and ideals of many later writers. Other major contributions include the poetry of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and the short stories of Melville, Poe, Hawthorne, and Harriet Beecher Stowe. Additionally, this era is the inauguration point of American literary criticism, led by Poe, James Russell Lowell, and William Gilmore Simms. The years 1853 and 1859 brought the first novels written by African American authors, both male and female: "Clotel," by William Wells Brown and "Our Nig," by Harriet E. Wilson.

## **What is Transcendentalism ?**

Transcendentalism is a philosophical movement that developed in the late 1820s and 1830s in New England. A core belief is in the inherent goodness of people and nature, and while society and its institutions have corrupted the purity of the individual, people are at their best when truly "self-reliant" and independent.

The characteristics of transcendentalism American literature?

Transcendentalism was heavily focused on seeking individual truth and growing to become more and more self-reliant. However, the movement can be described using three essential characteristics or principles: individualism, idealism, and the divinity of nature. Key transcendentalism beliefs were that humans are inherently good but can be corrupted by society and institutions, insight and

experience and more important than logic, spirituality should come from the self, not organized religion, and nature is beautiful and should be

## **Tenets of Transcendentalism**

- Everything is a reflection of **God**. ...
- A person's true feelings and intuition are more valuable than book knowledge. ...
- Contemplating nature can allow you to transcend the real world. ...
- A person's instinct can lead them to understand God's spirit.

Quite simply, transcendentalism is a social movement and idealistic philosophy in which knowledge about ourselves and the world around us "transcends" what we can see, hear, taste, touch, or feel. Transcendentalists believe that the divine spirit resides within all of us, they embrace intuition rather than rationality, and believe in the "inherent goodness of both people and nature." Equality for all humanity and nature manifested into supporting abolitionism, feminism, communal and sustainable living.

Many prominent American authors, particularly in Massachusetts, embraced the movement and formed what they called "The Transcendental Club" in the 1830s, and some organized utopian communes in the 1840s. You might think of them as intellectual "hippies" of the early 19th century. Many of them can also be considered Romantics. Exemplary Transcendental authors include Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, William Cullen Bryant, George Ripley, Margaret Fuller, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Louisa May Alcott, Walt Whitman (see Song of Myself Study Guide), and early in his career, Nathaniel Hawthorne, who later turned to Dark Romanticism.

The essence of Transcendentalism is perhaps best summarized by Ralph Waldo Emerson in his essay Nature:

"I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God. The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental: to be brothers, to be acquaintances, — master or servant, is then a trifle and a disturbance. I am the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty. In the wilderness, I find something more dear and connate than in streets or villages. In the tranquil landscape, and especially in the distant line of the horizon, man beholds somewhat as beautiful as his own nature."

### ***Walden: a Transcendentalist Text***

*Walden*, in full *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*, series of 18 essays by Henry David Thoreau, published in 1854. An important contribution to New England Transcendentalism, the book was a record of Thoreau's experiment in simple living on the northern shore of Walden Pond in eastern Massachusetts (1845–47). *Walden* is viewed not only as a philosophical treatise on labour, leisure, self-reliance, and individualism but also as an influential piece of nature writing. It is considered Thoreau's masterwork.

*Walden* is the product of the two years and two months Thoreau lived in semi-isolation by Walden Pond near Concord, Massachusetts. He built a small cabin on land owned by his friend Ralph Waldo Emerson and was almost totally self-sufficient, growing his own vegetables and doing odd jobs. It was his intention at Walden Pond to live simply and have time to contemplate, walk in the woods, write, and commune with nature. As he explained, "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life." The resulting book is a series of essays, or meditations, beginning with "Economy," in which he discussed his experiment and included a detailed account of the construction (and cost) of his cabin.

### **American Gothic Literature**

The genre of "Gothic Literature" emerged as the darkest form of Dark Romanticism in its extreme expressions of self-destruction and sin involving sheer terror, personal torment, graphic morbidity, madness, and the supernatural. Put simply, they are stories that scare the bejesus out of you! Edgar Allan Poe wrote some of the finest macabre tales in this genre

### ***The Raven by Edgard Allan Poe***

One of the best examples of the American romantic texts is *The Raven* by Edgar Allan Poe. This popular narrative poem is written in the first person. *The Raven* personifies the feeling of intense grief and loss, while other symbols throughout the poem reinforce a melodramatic mood that emphasizes the main character's grief and loss. *The Raven* explores the world of emotional wars that individuals face in all walks of life; specifically, the fight one can never ignore, the fight of control over the emotions of grief and loss. These battles are not physical, but leave scarring and bruising just as if they were. Poe has produced a wonderful piece of work that resonates with the feelings and experiences of every reader that comes across this poem.

### **The Realistic Period (1865–1900)**

In the history of the United States, the years following the Civil War symbolized a time of healing and rebuilding. However, for those engaged in serious literary circles that period was full of upheaval. In fact, it can be said that a “literary civil war” raged on between the camps of the romantics and the realists and later, the naturalists (“History 426”). What was caught in between was the literature called the genteel tradition. The dictionary meanings as well as the synonyms for the word genteel include “respectable, mannered, dainty, polite, elegant, stylish, and refined.” In fact, it was the American philosopher George Santayana who had characterized the literature that had provided a moral medium in fiction and poetry in the post- Civil War period as the genteel tradition. The eminent literary figures of this tradition had emphasized the ethical imperative in their novels, stories and periodical literature. However, the genteel tradition in the nineteenth century America was later vilified as it had represented the old mentality inherited from Europe - the code of Ladies and Gentlemen. The following paragraphs delineate the historical milieu from which the genteel tradition literature sprang, spread and ultimately failed to survive the emerging modern themes of realism and naturalism.

As a result of the American Civil War, Reconstruction and the age of industrialism, American ideals and self-awareness changed in profound ways, and American literature responded. Certain romantic notions of the American Renaissance were replaced by realistic descriptions of American life, such as those represented in the works of William Dean Howells, Henry James, and Mark Twain. This period also gave rise to regional writing, such as the works of Sarah Orne Jewett, Kate Chopin, Bret Harte, Mary Wilkins Freeman, and George W. Cable. In addition to Walt Whitman, another master poet, Emily Dickinson, appeared at this time.

# **Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn***

*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is one of Mark Twain's best-known and most important novels. The novel tells the story of Huckleberry Finn's escape from his alcoholic and abusive father and Huck's adventurous journey down the Mississippi River together with the runaway slave Jim. *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* incorporates, several themes developed around a central plot to create a story. In this case, the story is of a young boy, Huck, and an escaped slave, Jim, and their moral, ethical, and human development during a journey down the Mississippi River that brings them into many conflicts with the society around them. What Huck and Jim seek is freedom, and this freedom is sharply contrasted with the existing civilization along the great river. This conflict between freedom and orderly civilization forms the overarching theme of the novel.

## **Themes in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn***

### **Slavery and Racism**

Though Mark Twain wrote *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* after the abolition of slavery in the United States, the novel itself is set before the Civil War, when slavery was still legal and the economic foundation of the American South. Many characters in Twain's novel are themselves white slaveholders, like Miss Watson, the Grangerford family, and the Phelps family, while other characters profit indirectly from slavery, as the duke and the king do in turning... read analysis of Slavery and Racism

### **Religion and Superstition**

There are two systems of belief represented in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*: formal religion (namely, Christianity) and superstition. The educated and the "sivilized, like the Widow Douglas and Miss Watson, practice Christianity, whereas the uneducated and poor, like Huck and Jim, have superstitions.

### **Society and Hypocrisy**

Huck lives in a society based on rules and traditions, many of which are both ridiculous and inhuman. At the beginning of the novel, Huck's guardian, the Widow Douglas, and her sister, Miss Watson, try to "sivilize" Huck by teaching him manners and Christian values, but Huck recognizes that these lessons take

more stock in the dead than in living people, and they do little more than make him uncomfortable, bored,

## **The Naturalist Period (1900–1914)**

One remarkable intellectual trend, which emerged in America in the nineteenth century and which subsequently became a literary movement is Naturalism. American literary Naturalism developed out of literary Realism. Literary Naturalism shares some of Realism's characteristics because it has a concern with society and history. The goal of the present research is to supply a comprehensive account of literary Naturalism in America by giving its influences, characteristics, themes and styles of naturalists.

Naturalism is a word derived from nature ; it is the suggestion that art and literature should present the world and people just as science shows they really are. Naturalism is almost not easy to define and sometimes used as synonym of Realism. It is more pessimistic trend and it originated in France around 1870 with the first novels of Emile Zola. Naturalism was a literary movement of the late nineteenth century; it is an extension of Realism and developed out of it (The art of depicting nature as it is), it came as a reaction against the restriction inherent in the realistic focus of the ordinary, as naturalists insisted that extraordinary is real too. Naturalists were writing about criminals, slums, labourers, strikers and prostitute; they attacked capitalism, but also explained society in Darwinist terms heredity and environment determine man in world where only the fittest survive.

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Naturalism, as a literary movement has been widely influenced by contemporary, social and intellectual context. Two important factors that helped shaping the ideas and techniques of Naturalism in American literature are: first, the influence of Darwinism and second, the influence of French literary Naturalism.

In literature, Naturalism developed out of Realism. The significant influence that went to shape various points of view were Darwin's biological theories, Comte's application of scientific ideas to study society, and Taint's application of deterministic theories, they all concentrate on portraying social environment .

Charles Darwin (1809-1982) had a big influence on American literary culture in the late nineteenth century. He presented a theory about evolution and critical publications which are "On the Origin of Species by means of Natural Selection" (1859) in which his ideas were based on that all behavior production are a matter of biological determine forces, that there is nothing transcendent in human life and "The Descent of Man" (1871).

Darwinism ideas were manipulated in American author's appreciation, representation of civilization, human, nature, marriage, gender, race, the role of environment and heredity. Spencer the leading figure of what is known as social determinism coined the expression of "the survival of the fittest" which represents a social concept that parallels, to some extent, Darwin's biological concept of selection. Social Determinism advocated a new kind of determinism of natural ability in which any intervention on behalf of the poor or weak would weaken the race.

Darwin believed that all behavior productions are a matter of biological forces, that there is nothing transcendent in human life. The writing of Darwin and other evolutionists have widely been read by the new generation like Stephen Crane, Hamlin Garland, Frank Norris. So, Darwinian ideas had a significant impact on those writers. This era was characterized by the emergence of American

Naturalists who were inspired by an advance of French Naturalism led by Emile Zola.

The main thing that led to the foundation of American literary Naturalism as a narrative mode is the influence of French Naturalism. Zola was a French novelist, under him many realists became naturalists He was widely affected by Darwin's writing

About heredity and environment and he attempted to change these ideas into literary form,

Zola is regarded as the founding father of French literary Naturalism; he gave detailed descriptions of the era in his novels . Zola's novels stressed the

importance of heredity and environment in determining character. Also, he emphasized on people acting in groups, where humanity becomes of important matter. American writers were influenced by Emile Zola who was a good fruit of Balzac and Flaubert in France. In preface to *Thérès Raquin* (1868), Zola describes himself as naturalist. His technique was scientifically clinical that pathologist and physiologist. In his perspective men's lives and actions were determined by environment and heredity. After *Thérès Raquin* he designed a cycle of twenty volumes, which give the natural and social history of family. Out of these twenty novels the best known are *L'assommoire* (1877) and *Germinal* (Cuddon, 1998). In *La Débâcle* (1892), Zola spoke about the soldiers in Franco Prussian war and in *La Curée* (1872), he exposed the immorality of a wife who betrayed her spouse by having an incestuous affair with her stepson.

Eventually, all Zola's novels became known and influential and their renderings of fate, heredity and environment were adapted and developed within American context at the turn of the nineteenth century, by the works of Frank Norris, Stephen Crane and Hamlin Garland.

#### **4. Difference between Realism and Naturalism:**

Naturalism and realism are literary movements which came as response to romanticism but they differ in some points:

1-Realism is a literary movement characterized by the representation of real life while naturalism is an outgrowth of literary realism, influenced by scientific theories.

2-Realism portrayed the everyday life of ordinary people while naturalism portrayed how environment, heredity, and social condition control the being.

3-Realism depicted middle class characters while naturalism depicted lower class characters.

4-Realistic novels used themes like society, social class, and mobility while naturalistic novels used themes of violence, poverty, corruption, prostitution.

In general, naturalism is harsher than realism.

### **5 The Characteristics of American Literary Naturalism**

Naturalism is a new and harsher of realism, The term naturalism itself came from Emile Zola. It is believed that he sought a new idea to convince the reading public of something new and more modern in his fiction. He argued that his



innovation in fiction-writing was the creation of characters and plots based on the scientific method. Skinnerian principles of learning through conditioning and the Darwinian hierarchy of the survival of the fittest are the underlying themes involved in shaping the human character. There are many defining characteristics of literary naturalism.

One of these of naturalism is determinism. Determinism is basically the opposite of the notion of free will. For determinism, the idea that individual characters have a direct influence on the course of their lives is supplanted by a focus on nature or fate. Human beings are living in a natural environment like animals. They can react toward the exterior and interior forces but they are helpless before these forces. Often, a naturalist author will lead the reader to believe that a character's fate has been pre-determined, usually by heredity and environmental factors, that the destiny of humanity is misery in life and oblivion in death and that he/she can do nothing about it.

Another characteristic of literary naturalism is objectivism. The author often tries to maintain a tone that will be experienced as 'objective.' The author presents himself or herself as an objective observer, similar to a scientist taking note of what he or she sees.

Another characteristic is pessimism. Very often, one or more characters will continue to repeat one line or phrase that tends to have a pessimistic connotation, sometimes emphasizing the inevitability of death. Naturalistic works exposed the dark harshness of life, including poverty, racism, sex, prejudice, disease, prostitution, and filth.

Another common characteristic is a surprising twist at the end of the story. Equally, there tends to be in naturalist novels and stories a strong sense that nature is indifferent to human struggle.

Characters Frequently but not invariably ill-educated or lowerclass characters whose lives are governed by the forces of heredity, instinct, and passion. Their attempts at exercising free will or choice are hamstrung by forces beyond their control; Social Darwinism and other theories help to explain their fates to the reader.

Walcott identifies survival, determinism, violence, and taboo as key themes

The "brute within" each individual, composed of strong and often warring emotions: passions, such as lust, greed, or the desire for or pleasure ;and the fight for survival in an amoral, indifferent universe. The conflict in naturalistic novels is often "man against nature" or "man against himself" as characters struggle to retain

a "veneer of civilization" despite external pressures that threaten to release the "brute within.

Nature as indifferent force acting on the lives of human beings. The romantic vision of Wordsworth--that "nature never did betray the heart that loved her"

The forces of heredity and environment as they affect--and afflict--individual lives

An indifferent, deterministic universe. Naturalistic texts often describe the futile attempts of human beings to exercise free will, often ironically presented, in this universe that reveals free will as an illusion.

Influenced by European naturalists, especially by Emile Zola, at the end of the nineteenth century, a generation of writers arose in America, whose ideas of the workings of the universe and whose perception of society's disorders let them to naturalism, a new and harsher realism.

## **American Naturalist Writers**

Stephen Crane, *The Open Boat* (1898) *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*

Jack London, "To Build a Fire" (1901)

Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth*(1905)

ikç Ellen Glasgow, *Barren Ground*(1925)

John Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men*(1939)

Richard Wright, *Native Son*(1940), *Black Boy*(1945)

Norman Mailer, *The Naked and the Dead*(1948)