American Literature Background

American literature is the literature written or produced in the area of the United States and its colonies. During its early history, America was a series of British colonies on the eastern coast of the present-day United States. Therefore, its literary tradition begins as linked to the broader tradition of English Literature.

Owing to the large immigration to Boston in the 1630s, the high articulation of Puritan cultural ideals, and the early establishment of a college and a printing press in Cambridge, the New England colonies have often been regarded as the center of early American literature. The religious disputes that prompted settlement in America were also topics of early writing. Puritan poetry was highly religious in nature, and one of the earliest books of poetry published was the *Bay Psalm Book*, a set of translations of the biblical Psalms; however, the translators' intention was not to create great literature but to create hymns that could be used in worship.

THE COLONIAL PERIOD IN NEW ENGLAND

It is likely that no other colonists in the history of the world were as intellectual as the Puritans. Between 1630 and 1690, there were as many university graduates in the northeastern section of the United States, known as New England, as in the mother country -- an astounding fact when one considers that most educated people of the time were aristocrats who were unwilling to risk their lives in wilderness conditions. The self-made and often self-educated Puritans were notable exceptions. They wanted education to understand and execute God's will as they established their colonies throughout New England. The Puritan definition of good writing was that which brought home a full awareness of the importance of worshipping God and of the spiritual dangers that the soul faced on Earth. Puritan style varied enormously – from complex metaphysical poetry to homely journals and crushingly pedantic religious history. Whatever the style or genre, certain themes remained constant. Life was seen as a test; failure led to eternal damnation and hellfire, and success to heavenly bliss. This world was an arena of constant battle between the forces of God and the forces of Satan, a formidable enemy with many disguises. Many Puritans excitedly awaited the "millennium," when Jesus would return to Earth, end human misery, and inaugurate 1,000 years of peace and prosperity.

Scholars have long pointed out the link between Puritanism and capitalism: Both rest on ambition, hard work, and an intense striving for success. In recording ordinary events to reveal their spiritual meaning, Puritan authors commonly cited the Bible, chapter and verse. History was a symbolic religious panorama leading to the Puritan triumph over the New World and to God's kingdom on Earth. The first Puritan colonists who settled New England exemplified the seriousness

of Reformation Christianity. William Bradford was elected governor of Plymouth in the Massachusetts Bay Colony shortly after the Separatists landed. He was a deeply pious, self-educated man who had learned several languages, including Hebrew, in order to "see with his own eyes the ancient oracles of God in their native beauty." Bradford also recorded the first document of colonial self-governance in the English New World, the "Mayflower Compact," drawn up while the Pilgrims were still on board ship.

Puritans disapproved of such secular amusements as dancing and card-playing, which were associated with ungodly aristocrats and immoral living. Reading or writing "light" books also fell into this category. Puritan minds poured their tremendous energies into nonfiction and pious genres: poetry, sermons, theological tracts, and histories. Their intimate diaries and meditations record the rich inner lives of this introspective and intense people.

Anne Bradstreet (c. 1612-1672)

The first published book of poems by an American was also the first American book to be published by a woman -- Anne Bradstreet. It is not surprising that the book was published in England, given the lack of printing presses in the early years of the first American colonies. 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. Her husband eventually became governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, which later grew into the great city of Boston. She preferred her long, religious poems on conventional subjects such as the seasons, but contemporary readers most enjoy the witty poems on subjects from daily life and her warm and loving poems to her husband and children. She was inspired by English metaphysical poetry, and her book *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America* (1650) shows the influence of Edmund Spenser, Philip Sidney, and other English poets as well. She often uses elaborate conceits or extended metaphors. "To My Dear and Loving Husband" (1678) uses the oriental imagery, love theme, and idea of comparison popular in Europe at the time, but gives these a pious meaning at the poem's conclusion:

If ever two were one, then surely we.
If ever man were loved by wife, then thee;
If ever wife was happy in a man,
Compare with me, ye women, if you can.
I prize thy love more than whole mines of gold
Or all the riches that the East doth hold.
My love is such that rivers cannot quench,
Nor ought but love from thee, give recompense.
Thy love is such I can no way repay,
The heavens reward thee manifold, I pray.
Then while we live, in love let s so persevere
That when we live no more, we may live ever.

THE AMERICAN ENLIGHTENMENT

The 18th-century American Enlightenment was a movement marked by an emphasis on rationality rather than tradition, scientific inquiry instead of unquestioning religious dogma, and representative government in place of monarchy. Enlightenment thinkers and writers were devoted to the ideals of justice, liberty, and equality as the natural rights of man.

Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790)

Benjamin Franklin, whom the Scottish philosopher David Hume called America's "first great man of letters," embodied the Enlightenment ideal of humane rationality. Practical yet idealistic, hard-working and enormously successful, Franklin recorded his early life in his famous *Autobiography*. Writer, printer, publisher, scientist, philanthropist, and diplomat, he 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 his fine example helped to liberalize.

Women Writers

A number of accomplished revolutionary-era women writers have been rediscovered by feminist scholars. Susanna Rowson (c. 1762-1824) was one of America's first professional novelists. Her seven novels included the best-selling seduction story *Charlotte Temple* (1791). She treats feminist and abolitionist themes and depicts American Indians with respect. Another long-forgotten novelist was Hannah Foster (1758-1840), whose best-selling novel *The Coquette* (1797) was about a young women torn between virtue and temptation. Rejected by her sweetheart, a cold man of the church, she is seduced, abandoned, bears a child, and dies alone. Judith Sargent Murray (1751-1820) published under a man's name to secure serious attention for her works

TRANSCENDENTALISM

The Transcendentalist movement was a reaction against 18th century rationalism and a manifestation of the general humanitarian trend of 19th century thought. The movement was based on a fundamental belief in the unity of the world and God. The soul of each individual was thought to be identical with the world -- a microcosm of the world itself. The doctrine of self-reliance and individualism developed through the belief in the identification of the individual soul with God.

Transcendentalism was intimately connected with Concord, a small New England village 32 kilometers west of Boston. Concord was the first inland settlement of the original Massachusetts Bay Colony. Surrounded by forest, it was and remains a peaceful town close enough to Boston's lectures, bookstores, and colleges to be intensely cultivated, but far enough away to be serene. Concord was the site of the first battle of the American Revolution, and Ralph Waldo Emerson's

poem commemorating the battle, "Concord Hymn," has one of the most famous opening stanzas in American literature:

By the rude bridge that arched the flood
Their flag to April's breeze unfurled,
Here once the embattled farmers stood
And fired the shot heard round the world.

Concord was the first rural artist's colony, and the first place to offer a spiritual and cultural alternative to American materialism. It was a place of high-minded conversation and simple living (Emerson and Henry David Thoreau both had vegetable gardens).

THE ROMANCE

The Romance form is dark and forbidding, indicating how difficult it is to create an identity without a stable society. Most of the Romantic heroes die in the end: All the sailors except Ishmael are drowned in *Moby-Dick*, and the sensitive but sinful minister Arthur Dimmesdale dies at the end of *The Scarlet Letter*. The self-divided, tragic note in American literature becomes dominant in the novels, even before the Civil War of the 1860s manifested the greater social tragedy of a society at war with itself.

Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864)

Nathaniel Hawthorne, a fifth-generation American of English descent, was born in Salem, Massachusetts, a wealthy seaport north of Boston that specialized in East India trade. One of his ancestors had been a judge in an earlier century, during trials in Salem of women accused of being witches. Hawthorne used the idea of a curse on the family of an evil judge in his novel *The House of the Seven Gables*. Many of Hawthorne's stories are set in Puritan New England, and his greatest novel, *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), has become the classic portrayal of Puritan America. It tells of the passionate, forbidden love affair linking a sensitive, religious young man, the Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale, and the sensuous, beautiful townsperson, Hester Prynne. Set in Boston around 1650 during early Puritan colonization, the novel highlights the Calvinistic obsession with morality, sexual repression, guilt and confession, and spiritual salvation. For its time, *The Scarlet Letter* was a daring and even subversive book. Hawthorne's gentle style, remote historical setting, and ambiguity softened his grim themes and contented the general public, but sophisticated writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Herman Melville recognized the book's "hellish" power. It treated issues that were usually suppressed in 19thcentury America, such as the impact of the new, liberating democratic experience on individual behavior, especially on sexual and religious freedom. The book is superbly organized and beautifully written. Appropriately, it uses allegory, a technique the early Puritan colonists themselves practiced. Hawthorne's reputation rests on his other novels and tales as well. In *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), he again returns to New England's history. The crumbling of the "house" refers to a family in Salem as well as to the actual structure. The theme

concerns an inherited curse and its resolution through love. As one critic has noted, the idealistic protagonist Holgrave voices Hawthorne's own democratic distrust of old aristocratic families: "The truth is, that once in every half-century, at least, a family should be merged into the great, obscure mass of humanity, and forget about its ancestors." Hawthorne's last two novels were less successful. Both use modern settings, which hamper the magic of romance. *The Blithedale Romance* (1852) is interesting for its portrait of the socialist, utopian Brook Farm community. In the book, Hawthorne criticizes egotistical, power hungry social reformers whose deepest instincts are not genuinely democratic. *The Marble Faun* (1860), though set in Rome, dwells on the Puritan themes of sin, isolation, expiation, and salvation. These themes, and his characteristic settings in Puritan colonial New England, are trademarks of many of Hawthorne's best-known shorter stories.

Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849)

Edgar Allan Poe, a southerner, vision is mixed with elements of realism, parody, and burlesque. He refined the short story genre and invented detective fiction. Many of his stories prefigure the genres of science fiction, horror, and fantasy so popular today. Poe believed that strangeness was an essential ingredient of beauty, and his writing is often exotic. His stories and poems are populated with doomed, introspective aristocrats (Poe, like many other southerners, cherished an aristocratic ideal). Themes of death-in-life, especially being buried alive or returning like a vampire from the grave, appear in many of his works, including "The Premature Burial," "Ligeia," "The Cask of Amontillado," and "The Fall of the House of Usher." Poe's twilight realm between life and death and his gaudy, Gothic settings are not merely decorative.

Poe's verse, like that of many Southerners, was very musical and strictly metrical. His best known poem, in his own lifetime and today, is "The Raven" (1845). In this eerie poem, the haunted, sleepless narrator, who has been reading and mourning the death of his "lost Lenore" at midnight, is visited by a raven (a bird that eats dead flesh, hence a symbol of death) who perches above his door and ominously repeats the poem's famous refrain, "nevermore." The poem ends in a frozen scene of death-in-life:

And the Raven, never flitting, still
is sitting, *still* is sitting
On the pallid bust of Pallas just
above my chamber door;
And his eyes have all the seeming of
a demon's that is dreaming,
And the lamp-light o'er him
streaming throws his shadow on the
floor;
And my soul from out that shadow
that lies floating on the floor
Shall be lifted -- nevermore!

MODERNISM

The large cultural wave of Modernism, which gradually emerged in Europe and the United States in the early years of the 20th century, expressed a sense of modern life through art as a sharp break from the past, as well as from Western civilization's classical traditions. Modern life seemed radically different from traditional life -- more scientific, faster, more technological, and more mechanized. Modernism embraced these changes.

In literature, Gertrude Stein (1874-1946) developed an analogue to modern art. Stein once explained that she and Picasso were doing the same thing, he in art and she in writing. Using simple, concrete words as counters, she developed an abstract, experimental prose poetry.

POETRY 1914-1945: EXPERIMENTS IN FORM

William Carlos Williams (1883-1963)

William Carlos Williams was a practicing pediatrician throughout his life; his early poetry reveals the influence of Imagism. He later went on to champion the use of colloquial speech; his ear for the natural rhythms of American English helped free American poetry from the iambic meter that had dominated English verse since the Renaissance. His sympathy for ordinary working people, children, and everyday events in modern urban settings make his poetry attractive and accessible. "The Red Wheelbarrow" (1923), like a Dutch still life, finds interest and beauty in everyday objects.

So much depends
upon
a red wheel
barrow
glazed with rain
water
beside the white
chickens.

20TH-CENTURY AMERICAN DRAMA

American drama imitated English and European theater until well into the 20th century. Often, plays from England or translated from European languages dominated theater seasons. During the 19th century, melodramas with exemplary democratic figures and clear contrasts between good and evil had been popular. Plays about social problems such as slavery also drew large audiences; sometimes these plays were adaptations of novels like Uncle Tom's Cabin . Not until the 20th century would serious plays attempt aesthetic innovation. Popular culture showed vital developments, however, especially in vaudeville (popular variety theater involving skits, clowning, music, and the like). Minstrel shows, based on African-American music and folkways -- performed by white characters using "blackface" makeup – also developed original forms and expressions.

.....