The literature of the United States, often referred to as American literature because it could also include writings in the various American colonies before the founding of the United States, refers to written or literary work produced in the area of the United States. For more specific discussions of poetry and theater, see Poetry of the United States and Theater in the United States.

### Overview

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. However, unique American characteristics and the breadth of its production usually now makes it considered a separate path and tradition.

### Colonial literature

Some of the earliest American literature would be Nicholas Barr consider pamphlets and writing extolling the benefits of the colonies to both a European and colonist audience. John Smith of Jamestown could be considered the first American author with his works: A True Relation of ... Virginia ... (1608) and The generall Historie of Virginia, New England, and the Summer Isles(1624). Other writers of this manner included Daniel Denton, Thomas Ashe, William Penn, George Percy, John Lawson, John Hammond, Daniel Coxe, Gabriel Thomas, and John Winthrop, author of the journal published as A True Relation of... The Mayflower's arrival. Other religious influenced writers included Increase Mather and William Bradford, author of the journal published as a History of Plymouth Plantation, 1620–47. Others like Roger Williams and Nathaniel Ward more fiercely argued state and church separation.

Some poetry also existed. Anne Bradstreet and Edward Taylor are especially noted. Michael Wigglesworth wrote a best-selling poem, The Day of Doom, describing the time of judgement. Nicholas Noyes was also known for his doggerel verse.

Other early writings described conflicts and interaction with the Indians, as seen in writings by Daniel Gookin, Alexander Whitaker, John Mason, Benjamin Church, and Mary Rowlandson. John Eliot translated the Bible into the Algonquin language.
The revolutionary period also contained political writings, including colonists Samuel Adams, Josiah Quincy, John Dickinson, and Joseph Galloway, a loyalist to the crown. Two key figures were Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Paine. Franklin's Poor Richard's Almanack and The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin are esteemed works with their wit and influence toward the formation of a budding American identity. Paine's pamphlet Common Sense and The American Crisis writings are seen as playing a key role in influencing the political tone of the period.

During the revolution itself, popular poems and songs such as Yankee Doodle and Nathan Hale were popular. Major satirists included John Trumbull and Francis Hopkinson. Philip Morin Freneau also wrote important poems about the war's course.

Early U.S. literature

In the post-war period, The Federalist essays by Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay represent an important and historical discussion of government organization and republican values. Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence, influence on the Constitution, autobiography, and mass of letters also make him considered often an early and talented American writer. Fisher Ames, James Otis, and Patrick Henry are also valued for their political writings and orations.

The first American novel is sometimes considered to be William Hill Brown's The Power of Sympathy (1789). Much of the early literature of the new nation struggled to find a uniquely American voice. European forms and styles were often transferred to new locales and critics often saw them as inferior. For example, Wieland and other novels by Charles Brockden Brown (1771-1810) are often seen as imitations of the Gothic novels then being written in England.

Unique American style

With the War of 1812 and an increasingly desire to produce uniquely American work, a number of key new literary figures appeared, perhaps most prominently Washington Irving, William Cullen Bryant, James Fenimore Cooper, and Edgar Allan Poe. Irving, often considered the first writer to develop a unique American style (although this is debated) wrote humorous works in Salmagundi and the well-known 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. In 1835, 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. Cooper's Leatherstocking tales about Natty Bumpo were popular both in the new country and abroad.

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

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

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 meddlesome dictates of organized society. His radical writings express a deep-rooted tendency toward individualism in the American character. Other transcendalist writers influenced by Transcendentalism were Bronson Alcott, Margaret Fuller, George Ripley, Orestes Brownson, and Jones Very.

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.

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 novels. Inspired by Hawthorne’s example, Melville went on to write novels rich in 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.

### American lyric

America’s two greatest 19th-century poets could hardly have been more different in temperament and style. Walt Whitman (1819–1892) was a working man, a traveler, a self-appointed nurse during the American Civil War (1861–1865), and a poetic innovator. His magnum opus was *Leaves of Grass*, in which he uses a free-flowing verse and lines of irregular length to depict the all-inclusiveness of American democracy. Taking that motif one step further, the poet equates the vast range of American experience with himself—and manages not to sound like a crass egotist. For example, in *Song of Myself*, the long, central poem in Leaves of Grass, Whitman writes: “These are really the thoughts of all men in all ages and lands, they are not original with me....”

Whitman was also a poet of the body — “the body electric,” as he called it. In *Studies in Classic..."
American Literature, the English novelist D.H. Lawrence wrote that Whitman "was the first to smash the old moral conception that the soul of man is something ‘superior’ and ‘above’ the flesh.”

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886), on the other hand, lived the sheltered life of a genteel unmarried woman in small-town Massachusetts. Within its formal structure, her poetry is ingenious, witty, exquisitely wrought, and psychologically penetrating. Her work was unconventional for its day, and little of it was published during her lifetime.

Many of her poems dwell on death, often with a mischievous twist. "Because I could not stop for Death," one begins, "He kindly stopped for me." The opening of another Dickinson poem toys with her position as a woman in a male-dominated society and an unrecognized poet: "I'm nobody! Who are you? / Are you nobody too?"

Realism, Twain, and James

Mark Twain (the pen name of Samuel 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 novel Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. Twain's style -- influenced by journalism, wedded to the vernacular, direct and unabashed but also highly evocative and irreverent -- 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. Other writers interested in regional differences and dialect were George W. Cable, Thomas Nelson Page, Joel Chandler Harris, Mary Noailles Murfree (Charles Egbert Craddock), Sarah Orne Jewett, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, Henry Cuyler Bunner, and William Sydney Porter (O. Henry).

William Dean Howells also represented the realist tradition through his novels, including The Rise of Silas Lapham and his work as editor of the Atlantic Monthly.

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 novels Daisy Miller, about an enchanting American girl in Europe, and The Turn of the Screw, an enigmatic ghost story.

Turn of the century

At the beginning of the 20th century, American novelists were expanding fiction's social spectrum to encompass both high and low life and sometimes connected to the naturalist school of realism. In her stories and novels, Edith Wharton (1862-1937) scrutinized the upper-class, Eastern-seaboard society in which she had grown up. One of her finest books, The Age of Innocence centers on a man who chooses to marry a conventional, socially acceptable woman rather than a fascinating outsider. At about the same time, Stephen Crane (1871-1900), best known for his Civil War novel The Red Badge of Courage, depicted the life of New York City prostitutes in Maggie: A Girl of the Streets. And in Sister Carrie, Theodore Dreiser (1871-1945) portrayed a country girl who moves to Chicago and becomes a kept woman. Hamlin Garland and Frank Norris wrote about the problems of American farmers and other social issues from a naturalist perspective.

More directly political writings discussed social issues and power of corporations. Some like Edward Bellamy in Looking Backward outlined other possible political and social frameworks. Upton Sinclair, most famously in his meat-packing novel The Jungle advocated socialism. Other political writers of the period included Edwin Markham, William Vaughn Moody. Journalistic critics, including Ida M. Tarbell and Lincoln Steffens were labelled the Muckrakers. Henry Adams' literate autobiography, The Education of Henry Adams also depicted a stinging description of the education system and modern life.

Experimentation in style and form soon joined the new freedom in subject matter. Int1909, Gertrude Stein (1874-1946), by then an expatriate in Paris, published Three Lives, an innovative work of fiction influenced by her familiarity with cubism, jazz, and other movements in contemporary art and music. Stein labelled a group of American literary notables who lived in Paris in the 1920s and 1930s as the "Lost Generation".

The poet Ezra Pound (1885-1972) was born in Idaho but spent much of his adult life in Europe. His work is complex, sometimes obscure, with multiple references to other art forms and to a vast range of literature, both Western and Eastern. He influenced many other poets, notably Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888-1965), another expatriate. Eliot wrote spare, cerebral poetry, carried by a dense structure of symbols. In "The Waste Land" he embodied a jaundiced vision of post-World War I society in fragmented, haunted images. Like Pound's, Eliot's poetry could be highly allusive, and some editions of The Waste Land come with footnotes supplied by the poet. In 1948, Eliot won the Nobel Prize in Literature.

American writers also expressed the disillusionment following upon the war. The stories and novels of F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896-1940) capture the restless, pleasure-hungry, defiant mood of the 1920s. Fitzgerald's characteristic theme, expressed poignantly in The Great Gatsby, is the tendency of youth's golden dreams to dissolve in failure and disappointment. Sinclair Lewis and Sherwood Anderson also wrote novels with critical depictions of American life. John Dos Passos wrote about the war and also the U.S.A. trilogy which extended into the Depression.

Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961) saw violence and death first-hand as an ambulance driver in World War I, and the senseless carnage persuaded him that abstract language was mostly empty and misleading. He cut out unnecessary words from his writing, simplified the sentence structure, and concentrated on concrete objects and actions. He adhered to a moral code that emphasized courage under pressure, and his protagonists were strong, silent men who often dealt awkwardly with women. The Sun Also Rises and A Farewell to Arms are generally considered his best novels; in 1954, he won the Nobel Prize in Literature.
Five years before Hemingway, another American novelist had won the Nobel Prize: William Faulkner (1897-1962). Faulkner managed to encompass an enormous range of humanity in *Foscovato* and *The Unvanquished*. (In fact, these passages are carefully crafted, and their seemingly chaotic structure conceals multiple layers of meaning.) He also jumbled time sequences to show how the past -- especially the slave-holding era of the *Deep South* -- endures in the present. Among his great works are *The Sound and the Fury*, *Absalom, Absalom!*, *Go Down, Moses*, and *The Unvanquished*.

**Southern literature**

Main article: [Southern literature](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Southern_literature)

Depression-era literature was blunt and direct in its social criticism. John Steinbeck (1902-1968) was born in Salinas, California, where he set many of his stories. His style was simple and evocative, winning him the favour of the readers but not of the critics. Steinbeck often wrote about poor, working-class people and their struggle to lead a decent and honest life; he was probably the most social aware writer of his period. *Grapes of Wrath*, considered his masterpiece, is a strong, social-oriented novel that tells the story of the Joads, a poor family from Oklahoma and their journey to California in search of a better life. Other popular novels include *Tortilla Flat*, *Of Mice and Men* *Cannery Row* and *East of Eden*. He was awarded the *Nobel Prize in Literature* in 1962. Other writers, sometimes considered of the proletarian school, were Nathanael West, Fielding Burke, Jack Conroy, Tom Kromer, Robert Cantwell, Albert Halper, and Edward Anderson.

**Theater**

In addition to fiction, the 1920s and 1930s were a rich period for drama. There had not been an important American dramatist until Eugene O'Neill (1888-1953) began to write his plays. The 1936 winner of the *Nobel Prize in Literature*, O'Neill drew upon classical mythology, the Bible, and the new science of psychology to explore inner life. He wrote frankly about sex and family quarrels, but his preoccupation was with the individual's search for identity. One of his greatest works is *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, a harrowing drama, small in scale but large in theme, based largely on his own family.

Another strikingly original American playwright was Tennessee Williams (1911-1983), who expressed his southern heritage in poetic yet sensational plays, usually about a sensitive woman trapped in a brutish environment. Several of his plays have been made into films, including *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. Other playwrights of the period were Maxwell Anderson, Marc Connelly, Elmer Rice, Lillian Hellman, Clifford Odets, Thornton Wilder, and William Saroyan.

**Post-World War II**

There were a number of major American war novels written in the wake of *World War II*. Some of the most well known included Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), Irwin Shaw, James Jones, and later Joseph Heller (*Catch-22*) and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. (*Slaughterhouse-Five*).

In the 1950s the West Coast spawned a literary movement, the poetry and fiction of the *Beat Generation*, a name that referred simultaneously to the rhythm of jazz music, to a sense that post-war society was worn out, and to an interest in new forms of experience through drugs, alcohol, and Eastern mysticism. Poet Allen Ginsberg (*Howl*, a Whitmanesque work that begins with this powerful line: "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness...") Jack Kerouac (*On the Road*, 1957) celebrated the Beats' carefree, hedonistic life-style in his episodic novel *On the Road*.

**Post-Postmodernism and Other Recent Movements**

Since 1970, rising along with a literary trend in literature focusing on the minorities, has been a new semi-populist literary trend which has taken hints in terms of some approaches of stylization with postmodernism but that is much more accessible. Authors of this vein include John Irving and T.C. Boyle. Post-Postmodernism, a rather heavy title for an ongoing movement that started in the 1980s, includes younger writers like Brett Easton Ellis, Michael Chabon, Jonathan Safran Foer, David Sedaris, Jeffrey Eugenides, Mark Haddon, Audrey Niffenegger, and Yann Martel. These authors typically employ a mix of soulful plots with some ideological context, stylistic maximalism on top of the substance allowing the substance to be "turned and pinched" many ways (including an almost endless array of storyline-bending and repositioning effects), an almost pop-culture level of enhanced imagery and scene structure influenced by film and television, and a symbolism that includes images from contemporary American culture. This movement can also be called "maximalism", with its blowing melodrama, use of literary effects, and scale of cultural reference. As well, commentary on the literary process and modes of thought and storytelling and an ambiguous and very close relation between reality and fiction are often features of post-postmodernism. Many critics criticize post-postmodernism for its use of style over true substance in some worse cases, though it can often strike a fine accord between these.

**Modern humorist literature**

From Irving and Hawthorne to the present day, the short story has been a favorite American form. One of its 20th-century masters was John Cheever (1912-1982), who brought yet another facet of American life into the realm of literature: the affluent suburbs that have grown up around most major cities. Cheever was long associated with The New Yorker, a magazine noted for its wit and sophistication. John Updike also continued Cheever's tradition and is best known for his *Rabbit* series.

Although trend-spotting in literature that is still being written can be dangerous, the recent emergence of fiction by members of minority groups has been striking. Here are only a few examples.
See also

- Southern literature
- African American literature
- Literature of Puerto Rico
- List of Native American Writers
- The Great American Novel

See the article on digital poetry for links to contemporary American work of the avant garde.

Jewish writers

Main article: Jewish American literature

The United States has had a community and tradition of writing by Jewish immigrants and their descendants for a long time, although many writers have objected to being reduced to "Jewish" writers alone. Key writers with Jewish origins are Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, Grace Paley, Philip Roth, and Isaac Bashevis Singer.

African American literature

Main article: African American literature

African American literature is literature written by, about, and sometimes specifically for African Americans. The genre began during the 18th and 19th centuries with writers such as poet Phillis Wheatley and orator Frederick Douglass. Among the themes and issues explored in African American literature are the role of African Americans within the larger American society, African American culture, racism, slavery, and equality.

Before the American Civil War, African American literature primarily focused on the issue of slavery, as indicated by the popular subgenre of slave narratives. At the turn of the 20th century, books by authors such as W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington debated whether to confront or appease racist attitudes in the United States.

African American literature saw a surge during the 1920s with the rise of an artistic Black community in the New York City neighborhood of Harlem. The period called the Harlem Renaissance produced such gifted poets as Langston Hughes (1902–1967), Countee Cullen (1903–1946), and Claude McKay (1889–1948). The novelist Zora Neale Hurston (1903–1960) combined a gift for storytelling with the study of anthropology to write vivid stories from the African-American oral tradition. Through such books as the novel Their Eyes Were Watching God — about the life and marriages of a light-skinned African-American woman — Hurston influenced a later generation of black women novelists.

After World War II, a new receptivity to diverse voices brought black writers into the mainstream of American literature. James Baldwin (1924–1987) expressed his disdain for racism and his celebration of sexuality in Giovanni's Room. In Invisible Man Ralph Ellison (1914–1994) linked the plight of African Americans, whose race can render them all but invisible to the majority white culture, with the larger theme of the human search for identity in the modern world.

Today, African American literature has become accepted as an integral part of American literature, with books in the genre, such as Roots: The Saga of an American Family by Alex Haley and The Color Purple by Alice Walker, achieving both best-selling and award-winning status. In addition, African American authors such as Toni Morrison are ranked among the top writers in the United States.

Other ethnic, minority, and immigrant literatures

See also: Gay literature, Native American literature, Hispanic American literature, Asian-American literature

Native American writer Leslie Marmon Silko (1948–) uses colloquial language and traditional stories to fashion haunting, lyrical poems such as In Cold Storm Light, Amy Tan (1952–), of Chinese descent, has described her parents' early struggles in California in The Joy Luck Club. Oscar Hijuelos (1951–), a writer with roots in Cuba, won the 1991 Pulitzer Prize for his novel The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love. In a series of novels beginning with A Boy's Own Story, Edmund White (1940–) has captured the anguish and comedy of growing up gay in America.

Other genres

Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler pioneered gritty detective fiction that has had great influence on other genres and in other countries.

The United States has also played a key role in the development of science fiction with authors like Isaac Asimov, Robert Heinlein, and Philip K. Dick.
Colonial literature refers to the literature written during the period when Europeans settled the colonies. It was not literature as we think of literature...there are several reasons for this... Colonial literature. American Literature pages 98-130, selected handouts. Colonial Literature. Colonial literature refers to the literature written during the period when Europeans settled the colonies. It was not literature as we think of literature...there are several reasons for this. Post-Colonial Literature in English. Introduction: Postcolonial literature refers to writing from regions of the world that were once colonies of European powers. The term refers to a very broad swath of writing in many languages, but the emphasis in this class (in an English department) is on writing in English.