American literature
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literature in English produced in what is now the United States of America.

Colonial Literature
American writing began with the work of English adventurers and colonists in the New World chiefly for the benefit of readers in the mother country. Some of these early works reached the level of literature, as in the robust and perhaps truthful account of his adventures by Captain John Smith and the sober, tendentious journalistic histories of John Winthrop and William Bradford in New England. From the beginning, however, the literature of New England was also directed to the edification and instruction of the colonists themselves, intended to direct them in the ways of the godly.

The first work published in the Puritan colonies was the Bay Psalm Book (1640), and the whole effort of the divines who wrote furiously to set forth their views—among them Roger Williams and Thomas Hooker—was to defend and promote visions of the religious state. They set forth their visions—in effect the first formulation of the concept of national destiny—in a series of impassioned histories and jeremiads from Edward Johnson's Wonder-Working Providence (1654) to Cotton Mather's epic Magnalia Christi Americana (1702).

Even Puritan poetry was offered uniformly to the service of God. Michael Wigglesworth's Day of Doom (1662) was uncompromisingly theological, and Anne Bradstreet's poems, issued as The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America (1650), were reflective of her own piety. The best of the Puritan poets, Edward Taylor, whose work was not published until two centuries after his death, wrote metaphysical verse worthy of comparison with that of the English metaphysical poet George Herbert.

Sermons and tracts poured forth until austere Calvinism found its last utterance in the words of Jonathan Edwards. In the other colonies writing was usually more mundane and on the whole less notable, though the journal of the Quaker John Woolman is highly esteemed, and some critics maintain that the best writing of the colonial period is found in the witty and urbane observations of William Byrd, a gentleman planter of Westover, Virginia.

A New Nation and a New Literature
The approach of the American Revolution and the achievement of the actual independence of the United States was a time of intellectual activity as well as social and economic change. The men who were the chief molders of the new state included excellent writers, among them Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton. They were well supported by others such as Philip Freneau, the first American lyric poet of distinction and an able journalist; the pamphleteer Thomas Paine, later an attacker of conventional religion; and the polemicist Francis Hopkinson, who was also the first American musical composer.

The variously gifted Benjamin Franklin forwarded American literature not only through his own writing but also by founding and promoting newspapers and periodicals. Many literary aspirants, such as John Trumbull, Timothy Dwight, Joel Barlow, and the other Connecticut Wits, used English models. The infant American theater showed a nationalistic character both in its first comedy, The Contrast (1787), by Royall Tyler, and in the dramas of William Dunlap. The first American novel, The Power of Sympathy
(1789), by William Hill Brown, only shortly preceded the Gothic romance, *Wieland* (1799), by the first professional American novelist, Charles Brockden Brown.

Recognition in Europe, and especially in England, was coveted by every aspiring American writer and was first achieved by two men from New York: Washington Irving, who first won attention by presenting American folk stories, and James Fenimore Cooper, who wrote enduring tales of adventure on the frontier and at sea. By 1825 William Cullen Bryant had made himself the leading poet of America with his delicate lyrics extolling nature and his smooth, philosophic poems in the best mode of romanticism. Even more distinctly a part of the romantic movement were such poets as Joseph Rodman Drake, Fitz-Greene Halleck, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, who won the hearts of Americans with glib, moralizing verse and also commanded international respect.

Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau stood at the center of transcendentalism, a movement that made a deep impression upon their native land and upon Europe. High-mindedness, moral earnestness, the desire to reform society and education, the assertion of a philosophy of the individual as superior to tradition and society—all these were strongly American, and transcendentalists such as Emerson, Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, and Bronson Alcott insisted upon such principles.

Men as diverse as James Russell Lowell, Boston “Brahmin,” poet, and critic, and John Greenleaf Whittier, the bucolic poet, joined in support of the abolitionist cause. The more worldly and correct Oliver Wendell Holmes reflected the vigorous intellectual spirit of the time, as did the historians William Hickling Prescott, George Bancroft, Francis Parkman, and John Lothrop Motley. Their solemn histories were as distinctly American as the broadly humorous writing that became popular early in the 19th cent. This was usually set forth as the sayings of semiliterate, often raffish, and always shrewd American characters like Hosea Biglow (James Russell Lowell), Artemus Ward (Charles Farrar Browne), Petroleum Vesuvius Nasby (David Ross Locke), Josh Billings (Henry Walker Shaw), and Sut Lovingood (G. W. Harris).

Far removed from these humorists in spirit and style was Edgar Allan Poe, whose skilled and emotional poetry, clearly expressed aesthetic theories, and tales of mystery and horror won for him a more respectful audience in Europe than—or originally, at least—in America. A number of seminal works of American literature were written during the 1850s. These include Nathaniel Hawthorne’s novel *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), depicting the gloomy atmosphere of early Puritanism; Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* (1851), which infused into an adventure tale of whaling days profound symbolic significance; and the rolling measures of Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* (1st ed. 1855), which employed a new kind of poetry and proclaimed the optimistic principles of American democracy.

**The Literature of a Split and a Reunited Nation**

The rising conflict between the North and the South that ended in the Civil War was reflected in regional literature. The crusading spirit against Southern slavery in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s overwhelmingly successful novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) can be compared with the violent anti-Northern diatribes of William Gilmore Simms. While the Civil War was taking its inexorable course, the case for reunion was set forth by President Abraham Lincoln in that purest and most exact statement of American political ideals, the Gettysburg Address.

Once the war was over, literature gradually regained a national identity amid expanding popularity, as writings of regional origin began to find a mass audience. The stories of the California gold fields by
Bret Harte, the rustic novel (The Hoosier Schoolmaster; 1871) of Edward Eggleston, the rhymes of James Whitcomb Riley, the New England genre stories of Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, the sketches of Louisiana by George W. Cable, even the romance of the Old South woven by the poetry of Henry Timrod and Sidney Lanier and the fiction of Thomas Nelson Page—all were seized eagerly by the readers of the reunited nation. The outstanding example of genius overcoming any regionalism in scene can be found in many of the works of Mark Twain, most notably in his Huckleberry Finn (1884).

Drama after the Civil War and into the 20th cent. continued to rely, as it had before, on spectacles, on the plays of Shakespeare, and on some of the works of English and Continental playwrights. A few popular plays such as Uncle Tom's Cabin and Rip Van Winkle were based on American fiction; others were crude melodrama. Realism, however, came to the theater with some of the plays of Bronson Howard, James A. Herne, and William Vaughn Moody.

The Turn of the Century

Trends in American Fiction

The connection of American literature with writing in England and Europe was again stressed by William Dean Howells, who was not only an able novelist but an instructor in literary realism to other American writers. Though he himself had leanings toward social reform, Howells did encourage what has come to be called "genteel" writing, long dominant in American fiction. The mold for this sort of writing was broken by the American turned Englishman, Henry James, who wrote of people of the upper classes but with such psychological penetration, subtlety of narrative, and complex technical skill that he is recognized as one of the great masters of fiction. His influence was quickly reflected in the novels of Edith Wharton and others and continued to grow in strength in the 20th cent.

The realism preached by Howells was turned away from bourgeois milieus by a number of American writers, particularly Stephen Crane in his poetry and his fiction—Maggie: A Girl of the Streets (1893) and the Civil War story, The Red Badge of Courage (1895). These were forerunners of naturalism, which reached heights in the hands of Theodore Dreiser and Jack London, the latter a fiery advocate of social reform as well as a writer of Klondike stories.

Ever since the Civil War, voices of protest and doubt have been heard in American fiction. Mark Twain (with Charles Dudley Warner) had in The Gilded Age (1873) held the postwar get-rich-quick era up to scorn. By the early 20th cent. Henry Adams was musing upon the effects of the dynamo's triumph over man, and Ambrose Bierce literally abandoned a civilization he could not abide.

American Verse

Since the mid-19th cent. American poetry had tended to empty saccharine verse—with the startling exception of the Amherst recluse, Emily Dickinson, whose terse, precise, and enigmatic poems, published in 1890, after her death, placed her immediately in the ranks of major American poets. A revolution in poetry was announced with the founding in 1912 of Poetry: A Magazine of Verse, edited by Harriet Monroe. It published the work of Ezra Pound and the proponents of imagism (see imagists)—Amy Lowell, H. D. (Hilda Doolittle), John Gould Fletcher, and their English associates, all declaring against romantic poetry and in favor of the exact word.

Meanwhile, other poets moved along their own paths: Edwin Arlington Robinson, who wrote dark, brooding lines on humankind in the universe; Edgar Lee Masters, who used free verse for realistic
biographies in *A Spoon River Anthology* (1915); his friend Vachel Lindsay, who wrote mesmerizingly rhythmical verse; Carl Sandburg, who tried to capture the speech, life, and dreams of America; and Robert Frost, who won universal recognition with his evocative and seemingly simply written verse.

**The Lost Generation and After**

The years immediately after World War I brought a highly vocal rebellion against established social, sexual, and aesthetic conventions and a vigorous attempt to establish new values. Young artists flocked to Greenwich Village, Chicago, and San Francisco, determined to protest and intent on making a new art. Others went to Europe, living mostly in Paris as expatriates. They willingly accepted the name given them by Gertrude Stein: the lost generation. Out of their disillusion and rejection, the writers built a new literature, impressive in the glittering 1920s and the years that followed.

Romantic clichés were abandoned for extreme realism or for complex symbolism and created myth. Language grew so frank that there were bitter quarrels over censorship, as in the troubles about James Branch Cabell's *Jurgen* (1919) and—much more notably—Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* (1931). The influences of new psychology and of Marxian social theory were also very strong. Out of this highly active boiling of new ideas and new forms came writers of recognizable stature in the world, among them Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, William Faulkner, Thomas Wolfe, John Dos Passos, John Steinbeck, and E. E. Cummings.

Eugene O'Neill came to be widely considered the greatest of the dramatists the United States has produced. Other writers also enriched the theater with comedies, social reform plays, and historical tragedies. Among them were Maxwell Anderson, Philip Barry, Elmer Rice, S. N. Behrman, Marc Connelly, Lillian Hellman, Clifford Odets, and Thornton Wilder. The social drama and the symbolic play were further developed by Arthur Miller, William Inge, and Tennessee Williams.

By the 1960s the influence of foreign movements was much felt with the development of “off-Broadway” theater. One of the new playwrights who gained special notice at the time was Edward Albee, whose later works again attracted attention in the 1990s. Important playwrights of recent decades who have imbued the modern world with qualities ranging from menace to a kind of grace in their surreal or hyper-real works include Sam Shepard, David Mamet, and Tony Kushner.

The naturalism that governed the novels of Dreiser and the stories of Sherwood Anderson was intensified by the stories of the Chicago slums by James T. Farrell and later Nelson Algren. Violence in language and in action was extreme in some of the novels of World War II, notably those of James Jones and Norman Mailer. Not unexpectedly, after World War I, black writers came forward, casting off the sweet melodies of Paul Lawrence Dunbar and speaking of social oppression and pervasive prejudice. Countee Cullen, James Weldon Johnson, Claude McKay, Zora Neale Hurston, and Langston Hughes in the 1920s and 30s were succeeded by Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and LeRoi Jones (later Amiri Baraka) in the 1940s and 50s.

Poetry after World War I was largely dominated by T. S. Eliot and his followers, who imposed intellectuality and a new sort of classical form that had been urged by his fellow expatriate Ezra Pound. Eliot was also highly influential as a literary critic and contributed to making the period 1920–60 one that was to some extent dominated by literary analysts and promoters of various warring schools. Among those critics were H. L. Mencken, Edmund Wilson, Lewis Mumford, Malcolm Cowley, Van Wyck Brooks, John Crowe Ransom, Yvor Winters, Lionel Trilling, Allen Tate, R. P. Blackmur, Robert Penn

[https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/american_literature](https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/american_literature)
Warren, and Cleanth Brooks.

The victories of the new over the old in the 1920s did not mean the disappearance of the older ideals of form even among lovers of the new. Much that was traditional lived on in the lyrics of Conrad Aiken, Sara Teasdale, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and Elinor Wylie. In the later years of the period two poets of unusual subtlety and complexity gained world recognition, though they had been quietly writing long before: Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams. The admirable novels of Willa Cather did not resort to new devices; the essays of E. B. White were models of pure style, as were the stories of Katherine Anne Porter and Jean Stafford.

In this period humor left far behind the broadness of George Ade’s *Fables* (1899) for the acrid satire of Ring Lardner and the highly polished style of Robert Benchley and James Thurber. The South still produced superb writers, notably Carson McCullers, Walker Percy, Flannery O’Connor, and Eudora Welty, whose works, while often grotesque, were also compassionate and humorous.

The tension, horror, and meaninglessness of contemporary American life became a major theme of novelists during the 1960s and 70s. While authors such as Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, Hortense Calisher, and Philip Roth presented the varied responses of urban intellectuals, usually Jews, and John Updike and John Cheever treated the largely Protestant middle class, William Burroughs, Joyce Carol Oates, and Raymond Carver unsparingly depicted the conflict and violence inherent in American life at all levels of society.

Irony and so-called black humor were the weapons of authors like Roth, Joseph Heller, and Jules Feiffer. However, other writers, notably Donald Barthelme, Jerzy Kosinski, Thomas Pynchon, and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., expressed their view of the world as unreal, as mad, by writing fantasies that were by turns charming, obscure, exciting, profound, and terrifying. Many of these writers have been called postmodern, but the term encompasses a number of characteristics, including multiculturalism, self-reflection, and attention to new means of communication.

Although the poets Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti gained initial recognition as part of the beat generation, their individual reputations were soon firmly established. Writers of "perceptual verse" such as Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, Denise Levertov, and Robert Duncan became widely recognized during the 1960s. One of the most provocative and active poets of the decade was Robert Lowell, who often wrote of the anguish and corruption in modern life. His practice of revelation about his personal life evolved into so-called confessional poetry, which was also written by such poets as Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, and, in a sense, John Berryman. Accomplished poets with idiosyncratic styles were Elizabeth Bishop and James Dickey. To some degree, poetry has also become polarized along ideological lines, as shown in the work of feminist poet Adrienne Rich.

Meanwhile, the bittersweet lyrics of James Merrill expressed the concerns of a generation.

The pressure and fascination of actual events during the 1960s intrigued many writers of fiction, and Truman Capote, John Hersey, James Michener, and Norman Mailer wrote with perception and style about political conventions, murders, demonstrations, and presidential elections. Post–Vietnam War American literature has called into question many previously unchallenged assumptions about life. In addition, writing in many prose styles, such novelists as Don DeLillo, Peter Taylor, William Kennedy, Richard Ford, Robert Stone, E. Annie Proulx, and T. Coraghessen Boyle have explored a wide variety of experiences and attitudes in contemporary American society. The literature of the 1980s and 90s also encompasses the work of African-American (e.g., Nobel Prize–winner Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and...
Gloria Naylor), Latino (e.g., Oscar Hijuelos, Rudolfo Anaya, and Sandra Cisneros), Native American (e.g., Louise Erdrich and N. Scott Momaday), Asian-American (e.g., Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan), and homosexual (e.g., Edmund Wilson, David Leavitt, and Rita Mae Brown) writers, who previously were often excluded or ignored in mainstream literature.

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