

Shifts in Historical Periods of American Literature

1. Puritanism (1620-1730s):

- World view: is providential: **Theism** (specifically Calvinist). Trust in God regardless of circumstances. Brotherly love, belief in the power of the Gospel, did not separate religious life from secular life.
- Knowledge: comes from grace, Scripture (studied original languages, almost all were educated at Oxford or Cambridge). Preached expository sermons to cover all of Bible. Established Harvard in 1636, education extremely important, first Primer was biblical
- Social view: governmental theocracy: They are the new Israelites in the Promised Land, after exile from Europe
- Self Concept: very conscientious, people of prayer, responsibility, and accountability.
- View of Nature: Literal Genesis Creation, the living work of God, but most were not naturalists.
- View of history: Supernatural, the Seen and the Unseen worlds that co-exist.
- Representative Persons and works: Wm. Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*; Winthrop, Jonathan Edwards, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, *Personal Narrative*; Michael Wigglesworth, *Day of Doom*; Mary Rowlandson, *Captivity Narrative*; John Smith, romanticized account of Pocahontas; Cotton Mather, Anne Bradstreet, various poems; Phillis Wheatley, poetry of a grateful Christian slave.
- Other topics and works to introduce: Mayflower Compact, Native American tribal histories, Salem witch trials.

2. Colonialism/Enlightenment (1740s-1820):

- Knowledge: Lockian empiricism, through senses and reason
- Three characteristics of Enlightenment
 - Emphasis on reason to discover truth for self about humanity and the world
 - Skepticism towards all traditions and authorities of the past, no assumptions
 - Rejection of medieval scientific thought, emphasis on Newtonian intellectual scientific method
- World view: natural laws are discoverable, **Deism** (clockwork universe, celestial watchmaker)
- Social view: democracy, common man is more moral, closer to truth, Constitution is "machine" to set government in motion
- self concept: social, member of a community, be a good citizen, social works
- View of Nature: mechanical, scientific, follows laws/rules, hierarchical separation of God, Man, Nature
- Representative Persons: Franklin, Jefferson

3. Romantic Period (1820-1860/65) biblical principles turned upside down

- Knowledge: genius, intuition, the sublime
- World view: individual directed, only know through own mind
- Social view: autocracy of the soul
- Self concept: focus on individualism, discovery of your true self
- View of Nature: organic, God, Man, Nature fused, somewhat pantheistic
- View of history: natural (in opposition to supernatural, the seen and the unseen worlds)
- Representative Persons: Emerson, Hawthorne

Elements of Transcendentalism: Alcott, Emerson, Thoreau, Dial Magazine, Brook Farm, Concord

- combines world of senses with a world beyond the senses –
- triumph of feeling/intuition over scientific reason –
- exaltation of individual over society –
- impatience of bondage to custom and habit –
- thrilling delight in nature

Transcendental Doctrines:

- living close to nature
- dignity of manual labor
- strong need of intellectual companionship and interests
- great emphasis on pseudo-spiritual living
- Man's relation to God personal, church connection and rituals, not needed (worship, personal prayer, ordinances)
- self-trust and self-reliance practiced at all times
- intense individualism

Philosophy and Tone of Transcendental writings:

- worth of the individual
- revolutionary tendency towards action
- rejection of the past, especially European traditions
- call for a new American literature (Insist on yourself, never imitate)

Romanticism [1830-1865] Hawthorne, Poe, Thoreau, Melville, Whitman, Dickinson

- emphasis on the individual, center of life/experience
- extraordinary characters in unusual circumstances
- concentration on Nature over world altered/affected by man -exult wild/natural, scorn the urban/artificial
- often set in distant/historic/exotic past
- importance of the imagination/intuition

Critique of Slavery--some common elements of slave narratives [1820-1865] Jacobs, Douglass

- emphasis on family and attempts to destroy or deny family ties
- undulating hope and hopelessness
- dehumanization, animal imagery of both slave and slave owner
- preference for death rather than slavery
- power and powerlessness, often tied to food imagery/hunger
- religious/political hypocrisy of slave owners

Southwestern Humor [1830s-1880s]: Twain, Bret Harte?

- anti-intellectual bias
- avid interest in "native" vernacular characters
- exaggeration/hyperbole often used
- interest in representing actual spoken dialects/vernacular
- often uses a Frame structure [genteel narrator vs. vernacular]

Local Color/Regionalism [1870-1910]: Mark Twain

- folklore, local customs fading, need to be preserved
- response to complexity of day, loss of pastoral
- nostalgic
- particular regional setting
- simple, deceptive quality; best work becomes universal

Realism [1865-1910] "Life is short - then you die"

- fidelity to actuality, reality as it appears through observation
- objectivity, neutrality

- social awareness, critical appraisal of society/institutions
- vernacular/dialect, spoken language verisimilitude
- focus on literary character rather than plot (as in romanticism)
- absolute opposition to sentimental fiction

Naturalism [1880-1900] Crane, London

- attempted objectivity
- frankness
- amoral attitude toward material
- philosophy of determinism
- pessimism
- projection of "strong" characters, animal or neurotic natures

Modernism [1915-1945] Faulkner, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Pound, Marx, Darwin, Freud, and Nietzsche Philosophy

- anti-traditional, security in science, science will save mankind
- sense of social breakdown, post WWI, the Great Depression
 - morals are relative
- sees the world as 'fragmented'
 - construct out of fragments, unrelated pieces
 - no connective patterns, Judeo-Christian framework of absolutes gone, amoral
- point of view is remote, detached
- poetry is very allusive
 - allusions to myth, the Bible, foreign languages, street life, personal
 - lots of footnotes (e.g., The Wasteland, Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock)
 - reader must search for meaning, like a riddle
 - exceptions are Robert Frost, etc.
- literature questions its own purpose and existence
 - alienation from society, loneliness, despair
 - fear of death, inability to feel or express love
- literature addresses the elite, intellectuals and academics

Postmodernisms [1945-present] Vonnegut, Romantic thought which has destroyed itself

- Political Correctness, woman replaces woman
- Permissiveness: amoral (no morals), no belief, cynical, skeptical, insecure, suicidal
- Extremes in Tolerance, honor diversity, celebrate diversity, condemn absolutists like Christians
- Overemphasis on ethnicity, or gender: multicultural studies
- Fabricated History: feminist history, gay and lesbian history, PC history (religion removed)
- Denigration of Reason: fully subjective
 - Existentialism, the doctrine that all doctrines are fictional attempts to link the bare facts of existence, which themselves have no natural linkage at all. Every general pattern (Christianity, Buddhism, romanticism, Platonism, Communism, etc) is simply a plastic overlay imposed on top as a worldview
 - Deconstruction of literature . . .
- Literature reflects angst
- Death of Truth
 - Each person builds his/her own truth