**American Literature: An Overview Of The Development From The 17th To The 20th Centuries**

Like other national literatures, American literature was shaped by the history of the country that produced it. For almost a century and a half, America was merely a group of colonies scattered along the eastern seaboard of the North American continent--colonies from which a few hardy souls tentatively ventured westward. After a successful rebellion against the motherland, America became the United States, a nation. By the end of the 19th century this nation extended southward to the Gulf of Mexico, northward to the 49th parallel, and westward to the Pacific. By the end of the 19th century, too, it had taken its place among the powers of the world--its fortunes so interrelated with those of other nations that inevitably it became involved in two world wars and, following these conflicts, with the problems of Europe and East Asia. Meanwhile, the rise of science and industry, as well as changes in ways of thinking and feeling, wrought many modifications in people's lives. All these factors in the development of the United States molded the literature of the country.

**The 17th century**

American literature at first was naturally a colonial literature, by authors who were Englishmen and who thought and wrote as such. John Smith, a soldier of fortune, is credited with initiating American literature. His chief books included A True Relation of . . . Virginia . . . (1608) and The generall Historie of Virginia, New England, and the Summer Isles (1624). Although these volumes often glorified their author, they were avowedly written to explain colonizing opportunities to Englishmen. In time, each colony was similarly described: Daniel Denton's Brief Description of New York (1670), William Penn's Brief Account of the Province of Pennsylvania (1682), and Thomas Ashe's Carolina (1682) were only a few of many works praising America as a land of economic promise.Such writers acknowledged British allegiance, but others stressed the differences of opinion that spurred the colonists to leave their homeland. More important, they argued questions of government involving the relationship between church and state. The attitude that most authors attacked was jauntily set forth by Nathaniel Ward of Massachusetts Bay in The Simple Cobler of Aggawam in America (1647). Ward amusingly defended the status quo and railed at colonists who sponsored newfangled notions. A variety of counterarguments to such a conservative view were published. John Winthrop's Journal (written 1630-49) told sympathetically of the attempt of Massachusetts Bay Colony to form a theocracy--a state with God at its head and with its laws based upon the Bible. Later defenders of the theocratic ideal were Increase Mather and his son Cotton. William Bradford's History of Plymouth Plantation (through 1646) showed how his pilgrim Separatists broke completely with Anglicanism. Even more radical than Bradford was Roger Williams, who, in a series of controversial pamphlets, advocated not only the separation of church and state but also the vesting of power in the people and the tolerance of different religious beliefs.The utilitarian writings of the 17th century included biographies, treatises, accounts of voyages, and sermons. There were few achievements in drama or fiction, since there was a widespread prejudice against these forms. Bad but popular poetry appeared in the Bay Psalm Book of 1640 and in Michael Wigglesworth's summary in doggerel verse of Calvinistic belief, The Day of Doom (1662). There was some poetry, at least, of a higher order. Anne Bradstreet of Massachusetts wrote some lyrics published in The Tenth Muse (1650), which movingly conveyed her feelings concerning religion and her family. Ranked still higher by modern critics is a poet whose works were not discovered and published until 1939: Edward Taylor, an English-born minister and physician who lived in Boston and Westfield, Massachusetts. Less touched by gloom than the typical Puritan, Taylor wrote lyrics that showed his delight in Christian belief and experience.All 17th-century American writings were in the manner of British writings of the same period. John Smith wrote in the tradition of geographic literature, Bradford echoed the cadences of the King James Bible, while the Mathers and Roger Williams wrote bejeweled prose typical of the day. Anne Bradstreet's poetic style derived from a long line of British poets, including Spenser and Sidney, while Taylor was in the tradition of such Metaphysical poets as George Herbert and John Donne. Both the content and form of the literature of this first century in America were thus markedly English.

**The 18th century**

In America in the early years of the 18th century, some writers, such as Cotton Mather, carried on the older traditions. His huge history and biography of Puritan New England, Magnalia Christi Americana, in 1702, and his vigorous Manuductio ad Ministerium, or introduction to the ministry, in 1726, were defenses of ancient Puritan convictions. Jonathan Edwards, initiator of the Great Awakening, a religious revival that stirred the eastern seacoast for many years, eloquently defended his burning belief in Calvinistic doctrine--of the concept that man, born totally depraved, could attain virtue and salvation only through God's grace--in his powerful sermons and most notably in the philosophical treatise Freedom of Will (1754). He supported his claims by relating them to a complex metaphysical system and by reasoning brilliantly in clear and often beautiful prose.But Mather and Edwards were defending a doomed cause. Liberal New England ministers such as John Wise and Jonathan Mayhew moved toward a less rigid religion. Samuel Sewall heralded other changes in his amusing Diary, covering the years 1673-1729. Though sincerely religious, he showed in daily records how commercial life in New England replaced rigid Puritanism with more worldly attitudes. The Journal of Mme Sara Knight comically detailed a journey that lady took to New York in 1704. She wrote vividly of what she saw and commented upon it from the standpoint of an orthodox believer, but a quality of levity in her witty writings showed that she was much less fervent than the Pilgrim founders had been. In the South, William Byrd of Virginia, an aristocratic plantation owner, contrasted sharply with gloomier predecessors. His record of a surveying trip in 1728, The History of the Dividing Line, and his account of a visit to his frontier properties in 1733, A Journey to the Land of Eden, were his chief works. Years in England, on the Continent, and among the gentry of the South had created gaiety and grace of expression, and, although a devout Anglican, Byrd was as playful as the Restoration wits whose works he clearly admired.The wrench of the American Revolution emphasized differences that had been growing between American and British political concepts. As the colonists moved to the belief that rebellion was inevitable, fought the bitter war, and worked to found the new nation's government, they were influenced by a number of very effective political writers, such as Samuel Adams and John Dickinson, both of whom favoured the colonists, and Loyalist Joseph Galloway. But two figures loomed above these--Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Paine.Franklin, born in 1706, had started to publish his writings in his brother's newspaper, the New England Courant, as early as 1722. This newspaper championed the cause of the "Leather Apron" man and the farmer and appealed by using easily understood language and practical arguments. The idea that common sense was a good guide was clear in both the popular Poor Richard's almanac, which Franklin edited between 1732 and 1757 and filled with prudent and witty aphorisms purportedly written by uneducated but experienced Richard Saunders, and in the author's Autobiography, written between 1771 and 1788, a record of his rise from humble circumstances that offered worldly wise suggestions for future success.Franklin's self-attained culture, deep and wide, gave substance and skill to varied articles, pamphlets, and reports that he wrote concerning the dispute with Great Britain, many of them extremely effective in stating and shaping the colonists' cause.Thomas Paine went from his native England to Philadelphia and became a magazine editor and then, about 14 months later, the most effective propagandist for the colonial cause. His pamphlet "Common Sense" (January 1776) did much to influence the colonists to declare their independence. "The American Crisis" papers (December 1776-December 1783) spurred Americans to fight on through the blackest years of the war. Based upon Paine's simple deistic beliefs, they showed the conflict as a stirring melodrama with the angelic colonists against the forces of evil. Such white and black picturings were highly effective propaganda. Another reason for Paine's success was his poetic fervour, which found expression in impassioned words and phrases long to be remembered and quoted.

**The 19th century**

**Early 19th-century literature**

After the American Revolution, and increasingly after the War of 1812, American writers were exhorted to produce a literature that was truly native. As if in response, four authors of very respectable stature appeared. William Cullen Bryant, Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, and Edgar Allan Poe initiated a great half century of literary development.Bryant, a New Englander by birth, attracted attention in his 23rd year when the first version of his poem "Thanatopsis" (1817) appeared. This, as well as some later poems, was written under the influence of English 18th-century poets. Still later, however, under the influence of Wordsworth and other Romantics, he wrote nature lyrics that vividly represented the New England scene. Turning to journalism, he had a long career as a fighting liberal editor of The Evening Post. He himself was overshadowed, in renown at least, by a native-born New Yorker, Washington Irving.Irving, youngest member of a prosperous merchant family, joined with ebullient young men of the town in producing the Salmagundi papers (1807-08), which took off the foibles of Manhattan's citizenry. This was followed by A History of New York (1809), by "Diedrich Knickerbocker," a burlesque history that mocked pedantic scholarship and sniped at the old Dutch families. Irving's models in these works were obviously Neoclassical English satirists, from whom he had learned to write in a polished, bright style. Later, having met Sir Walter Scott and having become acquainted with imaginative German literature, he introduced a new Romantic note in The Sketch Book (1819-20), Bracebridge Hall (1822), and other works. He was the first American writer to win the ungrudging (if somewhat surprised) respect of British critics.James Fenimore Cooper won even wider fame. Following the pattern of Sir Walter Scott's "Waverley" novels, he did his best work in the "Leatherstocking" tales (1823-41), a five-volume series celebrating the career of a great frontiersman named Natty Bumppo. His skill in weaving history into inventive plots and in characterizing his compatriots brought him acclaim not only in America and England but on the continent of Europe as well.Edgar Allan Poe, reared in the South, lived and worked as an author and editor in Baltimore, Philadelphia, Richmond, and New York City. His work was shaped largely by analytical skill that showed clearly in his role as an editor: time after time he gauged the taste of readers so accurately that circulation figures of magazines under his direction soared impressively. It showed itself in his critical essays, wherein he lucidly explained and logically applied his criteria. His gothic tales of terror were written in accordance with his findings when he studied the most popular magazines of the day. His masterpieces of terror--"The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839), "The Masque of the Red Death" (1842), "The Cask of Amontillado" (1846), and others--were written according to a carefully worked out psychological method. So were his detective stories, such as "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841), which historians credited as the first of the genre. As a poet, he achieved fame with "The Raven" (1845). His work, especially his critical writings and carefully crafted poems, had perhaps a greater influence in France, where they were translated by Charles Baudelaire, than in his own country.Two Southern novelists were also outstanding in the earlier part of the century: John Pendleton Kennedy and William Gilmore Simms. In Swallow Barn (1832), Kennedy wrote delightfully of life on the plantations. Simms's forte was the writing of historical novels like those of Scott and Cooper, which treated the history of the frontier and his native South Carolina. The Yemassee (1835) and Revolutionary romances show him at his best.

**The 20th century**

**Writing from 1914 to 1945**

Important movements in drama, poetry, fiction, and criticism took form in the years before, during, and after World War I. The eventful period that followed the war left its imprint upon books of all kinds. Literary forms of the period were extraordinarily varied, and in drama, poetry, and fiction leading authors tended toward radical technical experiments.Experiments in dramaAlthough drama had not been a major art form in the 19th century, no type of writing was more experimental than a new drama that arose in rebellion against the glib commercial stage. In the early years of the 20th century, Americans traveling in Europe encountered a vital, flourishing theatre; returning home, some of them became active in founding the Little Theatre movement throughout the country. Freed from commercial limitations, playwrights experimented with dramatic forms and methods of production, and in time producers, actors, and dramatists appeared who had been trained in college classrooms and community playhouses. Some Little Theatre groups became commercial producers--for example, the Washington Square Players, founded in 1915, which became the Theatre Guild (first production in 1919). The resulting drama was marked by a spirit of innovation and by a new seriousness and maturity.Eugene O'Neill, the most admired dramatist of the period, was a product of this movement. He worked with the Provincetown Players before his plays were commercially produced. His dramas were remarkable for their range. Beyond the Horizon (first performed 1920), Anna Christie (1921), Desire Under the Elms (1924), and The Iceman Cometh (1946) were naturalistic works, while The Emperor Jones (1920) and The Hairy Ape (1922) made use of the Expressionistic techniques developed in German drama in the period 1914-24. He also employed a stream-of-consciousness form in Strange Interlude (1928) and produced a work that combined myth, family drama, and psychological analysis in Mourning Becomes Electra (1931).No other dramatist was as generally praised as O'Neill, but many others wrote plays that reflected the growth of a serious and varied drama, including Maxwell Anderson, whose verse dramas have dated badly, and Robert E. Sherwood, a Broadway professional who wrote both comedy (Reunion in Vienna [1931]) and tragedy (There Shall Be No Night [1940]). Marc Connelly wrote touching fantasy in a Negro folk biblical play, The Green Pastures (1930). Like O'Neill, Elmer Rice made use of both Expressionistic techniques (The Adding Machine [1923]) and naturalism (Street Scene [1929]). Lillian Hellman wrote powerful, well-crafted melodramas in The Children's Hour (1934) and The Little Foxes (1939). Radical theatre experiments included Marc Blitzstein's savagely satiric musical The Cradle Will Rock (1937) and the work of Orson Welles and John Houseman for the government-sponsored Works Progress Administration (WPA) Federal Theatre Project. The premier radical theatre of the decade was the Group Theatre (1931-41) under Harold Clurman and Lee Strasberg, which became best known for presenting the work of Clifford Odets. In Waiting for Lefty (1935), a stirring plea for labour unionism, Odets roused the audience to an intense pitch of fervour, and in Awake and Sing (1935), perhaps the best play of the decade, he created a lyrical work of family conflict and youthful yearning. Other important plays by Odets for the Group Theatre were Paradise Lost (1935), Golden Boy (1937), and Rocket to the Moon (1938). Thornton Wilder used stylized settings and poetic dialogue in Our Town (1938) and turned to fantasy in The Skin of Our Teeth (1942). William Saroyan shifted his lighthearted, anarchic vision from fiction to drama with My Heart's in the Highlands and The Time of Your Life (both 1939).