

Essential Questions of the Literary Period

The Contemporary Period (1970–Present)



How does literature shape or reflect *society*?

What social and political events have had the greatest impact on Americans since 1970?

Advance of the Computer Age Digital libraries, electronic voting, global positioning, virtual communities—Americans work, play, think, and even feel differently than did earlier generations. In an increasingly wireless and paperless world, Americans express themselves differently. Change is constant and quick, and many Americans are eager to live on the edge of the latest electronic moment.

Cultural Diversity The 2000 census reported 281 million people in the United States, encompassing a wide spectrum of races and cultural origins. Americans have grown closely attuned to cultural difference and diversity. Historians have revised views of the contributions of individuals once thought to be marginal, and virtually every cultural group has entered into the mainstream of American political, business, and artistic life.

Terrorism The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, had an enormous impact on the American consciousness. Americans reacted with anger, fear, appeals for calm, and calls for retaliation. The first decade of the millennium has been characterized by an increased sense of vulnerability, more active participation in international affairs, and heightened awareness of the need to resolve the complex situation.

TIMELINE

1978

1978: The Supreme Court upholds affirmative action in *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*.

1979: Trinidad V.S. Naipaul publishes *A Bend in the River*.

1979: Vietnam Hundreds of thousands of “boat people” flee Vietnam.

1979: England Margaret Thatcher becomes British prime minister. ▶



What values and attitudes have grown out of these events?

Personality vs. Anonymity “On the Internet, nobody knows you’re a dog.” So goes the caption of a cartoon showing a canine computer user. The cartoon highlights a great advance and a great drawback of the Computer Age. People may express themselves more fully than ever before, but they may also remain, or become, anonymous. Computers have made trust, authenticity, and accuracy major social and cultural concerns.

Materialism and Commercialism While aiding many countries around the world and dealing with economic problems at home, the United States still revels in material progress. Despite ups and downs, commerce fueled by advertising provides most Americans with a high standard of living compared to that of most other nations.

Multiculturalism Once, the “melting pot” image described American life: Immigrants were expected to become indistinguishable from the mass of other Americans. Now, Americans recognize the value of maintaining and savoring the cultural identities of people who are, at the same time, American. Global awareness, too, has made the achievements of cultures around the world not merely exotic but celebrated.

Security Attacked on its own soil in 2001, the nation guards itself with vigilance. Individuals, too, protect themselves from the new computer-assisted crime of identity theft.

The American EXPERIENCE

DAILY LIFE

Blogs: Democratizing the Writing World

The Life You Blog May Be Your Own—in fact, it probably is. Born of the word Weblog—a log or record of activities, thoughts, and comments that anyone may post on the World Wide Web—blogging has become a significant cultural enterprise. Contemporary technology has made it possible for anyone to be an author, and millions of people turn themselves into authors every day.

Entering the blogosphere is like having a diary of the world available, the private made public. Want to know what someone in another part of the country had for breakfast? You can certainly find a blog that lets you know. Want to tell the world what you thought of the latest movie? Someone somewhere wants your opinion.

In an age dominated by visual media—movies, television, video, Webcasts—blogging reminds us of the central role that writing still plays in our culture. Of course (like all writing) blogs may be trivial, tedious, self-serving, stupid, or even cruel. They can also be intelligent, incisive, entertaining, and even beautiful.

Political candidates explain themselves in blogs. Teachers expand their lessons in blogs. Artists experiment in blogs, and critics share their insights in blogs. It is even possible to become a professional and blog for a living.

There is a world of words out there in the blogosphere. So blog away!

1981: IBM makes “PC” a household term in America with the release of its first personal computer. ▶



1982: Colombian novelist Gabriel Garcia Márquez wins the Nobel Prize for Literature.

1982: Alice Walker publishes *The Color Purple*.

1984

◀ **1981:** Sandra Day O'Connor becomes the first woman appointed to the U.S. Supreme Court.

▶ **1982:** Vietnam Veterans Memorial is dedicated in Washington, D.C.



How are these values and attitudes expressed in American literature?

Diversity Perhaps nothing characterizes contemporary American literature more clearly than the range of its writers. Authors of every race, age, religion, nationality, culture, occupation, political affiliation, economic class, and level of talent express themselves.

Nonfiction Although fiction continues as a vital literary mode, contemporary readers have a strong appetite for reality-based tales and nonfiction. Autobiography, biography, history, true-life adventures, and stories of ordeals and practical accomplishments fill the bookstores.

Technology New modes of delivery, made possible by computer technology, enable people to read in new ways. Books, magazines, and newspapers can be read on computer screens or on electronic readers. Books, or parts of books, can be ordered and printed on demand.

Themes While American writers continue to explore the fundamental themes that literature has always addressed, some themes have a special appeal in our time:

- **Identity** Personal identity and cultural identity—who we are as individuals and who we are as Americans—are often profound concerns for writers of contemporary fiction and nonfiction.
- **Truth and Illusion** What is true, and how do we know it? In an age when “special effects” can manipulate almost anything, contemporary literature explores what it means to merge reality and imagination.
- **Success** Success—whether material, political, or spiritual—has always been an American preoccupation. Writers are now taking another hard look at it: What makes a person genuinely happy? How do ideas of success affect individuals, communities, or the planet as a whole?
- **Family** Contemporary society is redefining the family, creating the future with new social units. American literature is playing a vital role in examining what a family is and what it can be.

TIMELINE

1986: USSR Chernobyl nuclear disaster spreads a radioactive cloud across Eastern Europe.

1984

1986: The Space Shuttle *Challenger* explodes 73 seconds after launching, killing all seven crew members.



▲ **1987:** President Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev sign the INF treaty, agreeing to ban short-range and medium-range nuclear missiles.

1988: George Bush is elected president. ▼





What is the relationship between place and *literature*?

What kinds of places do contemporary Americans write about?

Ordinary Places Of course Americans still write about cities and towns, homes and schools, streets and malls. Readers find realistic life in the works of such writers as John Updike, Anne Tyler, Richard Russo, Richard Ford, Edward P. Jones, and Annie Proulx.

Ordinary Places Transformed Some writers set their stories in what-if places that have been dramatically, even fantastically, transformed. In Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* (2004), prejudice and chaos rule the nation. In *The Road* (2006), Cormac McCarthy tracks a grim journey through a post-apocalyptic American landscape.

How does a global awareness show up in American literature?

Green Literature A literary sub-genre emphasizes the relationship of people to the planet as a whole, tackling such topics as pollution and ecoterrorism. "Ecofiction" includes Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer* (2000) and T. C. Boyle's *A Friend of the Earth* (2000). In nonfiction, essays by Annie Dillard and John McPhee build on the legacy of Henry David Thoreau. In poetry, natural imagery is at the heart of the verse of Gary Snyder, W. S. Merwin, and A. R. Ammons.

The American EXPERIENCE

A LIVING TRADITION

A. R. Ammons, Emersonian Postmodernist

A. R. Ammons, a North Carolinian, looked at an unusual aspect of the American place. In a long poem called *Garbage* (1993), Ammons takes trash—and the reprocessing of it—as a symbol of our times. Unlike Modernists who strove to create poems that were well-constructed artifacts, Ammons, in good Postmodernist style, creates a talky, sprawling, shifting poem that is itself like a trash heap and that considers, among so many other things, its own making.

Emerson might have blinked and rubbed his eyes if he could have read this poem. However, he might also have recognized in it his own, distinctly American belief in newness.

from "Garbage" by A. R. Ammons

garbage has to be the poem of our time because
garbage is spiritual, believable enough
to get our attention, getting in the way, piling
up, stinking, turning brooks brownish and
creamy white: what else deflects us from the
errors of our illusionary ways . . .

here is the gateway to beginning, here the portal
of renewing change . . .

1989: China Pro-democracy demonstrations are violently suppressed at Tiananmen Square. ►



1991: USSR The Soviet Union is dissolved, resulting in the formation of fifteen independent nations.

1991: Middle East Unified forces led by U.S. defeat Iraq in Persian Gulf War.



◄ **1989: Germany** The Berlin Wall comes down.

1990: Congress passes the Americans with Disabilities Act, prohibiting discrimination against people with disabilities.

1991: South Africa Apartheid—the system of racial segregation—is repealed.

1992

How has electronic technology, by changing our surroundings, also changed our literature?

Communication Technology that has made communication faster and easier has altered the limitations of physical space and place.

- *Character to character:* Fictional characters frequently communicate by cell phone, and e-mail is a common plot device.
- *Author to reader:* Authors now use web sites to explain, expand, and discuss their works with their audiences.
- *Reader to reader:* Readers meet online to discuss books and authors, sharing ideas and opinions.
- *Reader to author:* Readers ask questions, respond, criticize, and make suggestions. This greater interactivity even turns some readers into authors themselves when fans write their own prequels and sequels to their favorite books.

Cultural References Similes, metaphors, allusions, and references of all kinds now often stem from television, movies, and the world of computers. Electronic media have centered themselves in the cultural mainstream, sometimes overshadowing traditional literary sources. Contemporary readers are just as likely to meet a reference to the Starship *Enterprise* as they are to Captain Ahab's *Pequod*. Cultural merging is taking place: In 2007, MtvU, part of the popular MTV Network, chose the renowned postmodern poet John Ashbery to be its first poet laureate.

Cyberliterature Cyberliterature, including hyperfiction and electronic poetry, is literature that is composed and experienced on computers. Hyperfiction offers nonlinear, multi-path, open-ended narratives that enable readers to "travel" around within a story, choosing where they want to go, deciding which characters and themes they want to follow. Electronic poetry uses the visual and aural capabilities of the computer to unfold new and colorful poetic experiences right before the reader's eyes.

TIMELINE

1992: Bill Clinton is elected president. ▶



1994: Rwanda Hundreds of thousands of ethnic Tutsis are killed in the Rwandan Genocide.

1994: England/France The Channel Tunnel that crosses the English Channel opens.

1992

1993: Toni Morrison wins the Nobel Prize for Literature. ▶



1994: South Africa Nelson Mandela becomes the first democratically elected president. ▶





What makes American literature *American?*

What qualities distinguish American literature today?

Cultural Diversity Just as American identity is a unique combination of the nation's mix of people, so is American literature a unique product of that mix. Cross-cultural contributions in subjects, forms, styles, and languages keep American writing alive, open, and adaptable.

Expanding Definition of Literature The definition of literature itself is changing. Just as nonfiction and fiction are merging, so are the "popular" and the "literary." Walk into a bookstore to find a novel that includes recipes, a poem that accompanies a photo essay, a romance that is "based on a true story," a graphic novel that is based on a movie, or a "nonfiction novel" based on a current event. All of it is literature.

Traditional and Postmodern Despite all that is changing, however, the American literary tradition continues to flourish. Writers still produce literature in time-tested forms and styles. Hawthorne would recognize a story by Joyce Carol Oates, and Whitman would celebrate a poem by A. R. Ammons. The co-existence of the traditional and the new has spurred a new vibrancy in American literary life.

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DEVELOPING AMERICAN ENGLISH

Brave New Words by Richard Lederer

The history of a living language like English is a history of constant change. Language is like a tree that sheds its leaves and grows new ones so that it may live on. New words, like new leaves, are essential to a living, healthy vocabulary.

Throughout history, as English speakers and writers have met with new objects, experiences, and ideas, they have needed new words to describe them. Nowadays, an average of 5,000 new words enter our language each year! The Anglo-Saxons used a vivid term to describe the great wealth of English—the *word-hoard*.

We needed a name for the system that connects computers around the world. So we combined the Latin prefix *inter*, "together," with the Anglo-Saxon word for a mesh fabric, and—presto!—we came up with the *Internet*.

The study of life on other worlds we have labeled *astrobiology*, from the Greek word parts *astro* ("star") + *bio* ("life") + *logy* ("study of").

The entire chromosomal makeup of an organism we now call the *genome*—a blend of two Greek words, *gene*(e) and (*chromos*)ome.

The brave new worlds of the arts and sciences, technology and medicine make headlines every day, but our English "word-hoard" will never run out of prefixes, suffixes, and roots to identify new concepts.

1996: Summer Olympic Games are held in Atlanta, Georgia.

1997: A lamb is cloned from a single cell of an adult sheep.

1999: Conflict between Albanians and Serbs in Kosovo leads to a war between Serbia and NATO forces.

1995: Amy Tan publishes her third novel, *The Hundred Secret Senses*.

1997: China Hong Kong returns to Chinese rule, ending British rule. ▶



2000

The American EXPERIENCE

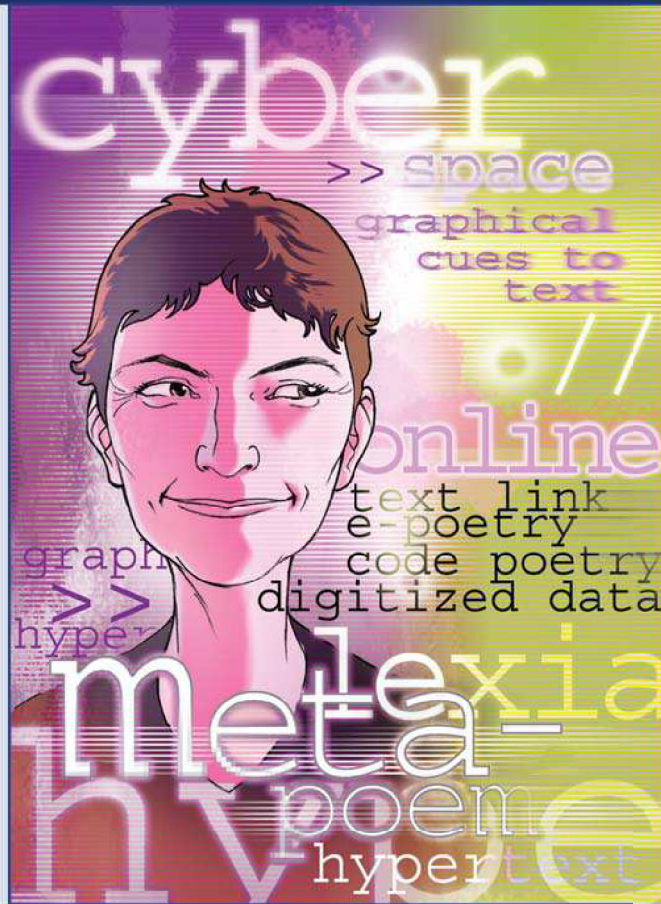
CONTEMPORARY CONNECTION

Stephanie Strickland: Hypertext Poetry Pioneer

Take the power of poetry to evoke emotion and charge the imagination and combine it with the power of new media and you get what some are calling a new literary genre: hypertext, or electronic poetry. Hypertext poetry presents text with graphics, images, sound, and live links to other texts. By choosing particular links, the reader shapes his or her own reading experience.

Poet Stephanie Strickland is a hypertext pioneer whose works live on the Web. Words dance on the screen, images shimmer, colors swirl. The reader becomes a viewer, a listener, and a participant. An artfully lettered phrase drifts across the screen and turns like a falling leaf while a wave crashes behind it, then more phrases follow.

On the one hand, Strickland simply does what poets have always done, which is engage readers' senses and emotions. However, she uses more than words in her creation of poetry. Readers might wonder, then: Is this a new generation of poetry or a different art form entirely? Just because it is easy to enjoy, is it easy to understand? In an interview in the *Iowa Web Review*, Strickland offers some insight. "My poetry wants to move from static moment to dynamic movement because that is the way the world feels to me."



TIMELINE

2000



▲ **2000:** George W. Bush defeats Al Gore in an extremely close and controversial presidential election.

2001: Hijacked planes crash into the World Trade Center in New York, the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., and a field in Pennsylvania on the same day. Thousands of lives are lost.

2002: The computer industry sells its 1 billionth personal computer, according to a study of worldwide sales.

◀ **2002: Europe** The Euro becomes the official currency of the European Union.



What is “postmodern” in American literature?

“Postmodern” signals works created after Modernism. Here are some of the qualities that help to define postmodern literature:

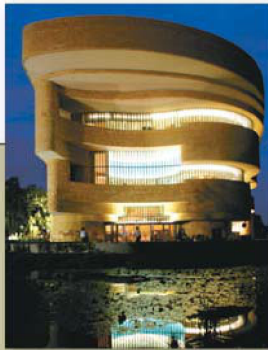
- **Awareness of Itself** A postmodern work is self-conscious. A postmodern character might refer to the novel he lives in, and a postmodern writer might comment on the story or poem the reader is reading.
- **Release from Meaning** World War II, the atomic bomb, and the Holocaust undercut reliance on rational meaning and the assumption that a work of art could, or needed to, mean anything at all.
- **Interest in Process** A postmodern work is recognized as an ongoing experience. Some works offer alternative versions of themselves.
- **Desire to Revise the Past** A postmodern work does not hesitate to use the past extensively, even re-seeing and rewriting it.
- **Desire to Have Fun** A postmodern work does not take itself so seriously. It may merge “high” and “low” culture. It may feel like a game.

Which American writers are pointing us toward the future?

American writing of extraordinary beauty, passion, imagination, and zest continues to tell us who we are and who we can become:

- Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), an acclaimed narrative of slavery and sacrifice told in a challenging mosaic style
- Andrea Barrett’s *Ship Fever* (1996), gripping stories that interweave fiction, history, and science
- Dave Eggers’s *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000), a postmodern family memoir of profound compassion

Contemporary American poets such as Louise Glück, Ann Lauterbach, Yusef Komunyakaa, and Li-Young Lee provide the verbal soundtrack that will accompany us through the twenty-first century.



◀ **2004:** The National Museum of the American Indian opens in Washington, D.C.



▲ **2006:** Pluto loses its status as a planet in a decision by the International Astronomical Union.

▼ **2003:** 43,435 hybrid electrical vehicles are registered in the United States, a 25.8% increase over the previous year.



2004: Indonesia An earthquake in the Indian Ocean causes a tsunami that claim 186,000 lives.

2005: Hurricane Katrina results in a severe loss of life and property in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama.

Present