

## Essential Questions of the Literary Period

# The Civil War and the Frontier (1850–1914)



How does literature shape or reflect *society*?

### What literary forms did writers use to discuss social and political issues during this period?

**Spirituals** Although spirituals were sung, not written down, they were the form of literature that grew directly out of the major social and political issue of the time—slavery. Born in the rhythms of work and based on biblical imagery, spirituals were lyrical expressions of lamentation, comfort, and hope. Songs like “Go Down, Moses” and “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” made it possible for slaves to at least imagine release into a better life.

**Life Stories** Nonfiction in which men and women related the dramatic events of their lives also gave literary form to the issues of the era. Sojourner Truth’s first-person account of her life and Frederick Douglass’s autobiography were true-life narratives of bondage and freedom. Richly detailed diaries, such as the one kept by Confederate wife Mary Chesnut, as well as the journals and letters of countless Civil War soldiers remain valuable and moving literary resources that turn abstract issues into the daily realities of actual human beings.

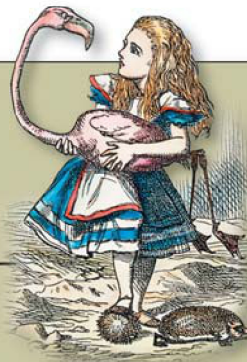
**Fiction and Journalism** With Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, fiction stepped up to play a major role in the politics of the era. Newspapers, too, took stands on a wide variety of issues and provided forums for editorials, essays, and public letters. After the Civil War, investigative journalists called muckrakers wrote blistering exposés of corruption, scandal, and incompetence in American industries.

### TIMELINE

1865

**1865:** The Thirteenth Amendment, outlawing slavery, is added to the U.S. Constitution.

**1865:** President Lincoln is assassinated by John Wilkes Booth.



▲ **1865: England** Lewis Carroll completes *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*.



▲ **1867:** The United States buys the state of Alaska from Russia.

## How did popular literature reflect the era's social and political issues?

**Rags to Riches** As America's cities grew, the struggle against crushing urban poverty became a fact of life for more and more people. Many readers turned to the young adult novels of Horatio Alger to find inspiration on the hard road to success. Alger's rags-to-riches stories of young men finding fame and fortune through right-thinking and moral actions were immensely popular, selling more than twenty million copies.

**Twists and Turns** William Sydney Porter started out as a journalist, worked in a bank, went to prison for embezzlement, and became a short story writer. Under the name "O. Henry," he published hundreds of tales of ordinary city dwellers and became one of the most popular writers in America. His stories are often humorous episodes that include twists of fate. Beneath the light-hearted surface, however, his ironic surprise endings suggest how much people felt their lives were subject to coincidence and chance.

**The West and the Wizard** Millions of Americans who never set foot on a prairie or an open range loved the Western novels of Zane Grey. The closing of the frontier encouraged a romantic view of the lost West, and Grey capitalized on that vision with exciting tales of self-reliant cowboys, many of which were later turned into movies. Industrial-age Americans found escapism of a different kind in L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900), a fantasy so popular it led to thirteen sequels.

## The American EXPERIENCE

### ART IN THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

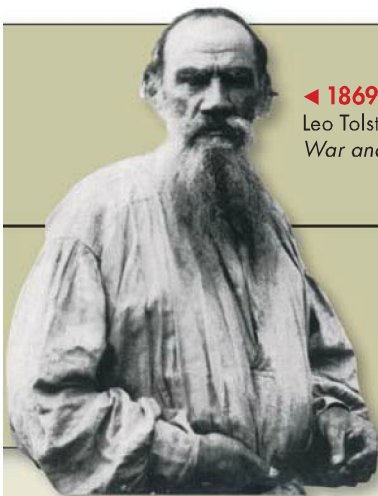
#### Realism in Painting: The Ashcan School

At the turn of the twentieth century, a group of artists working in Philadelphia and New York realized that city life was fertile ground for a new kind of imagery. They shared the basic principles and attitudes of Realism, and they developed ways of conveying Realism visually. These painters were aware that America was becoming increasingly urban, and they wanted to depict this new steel-and-concrete reality. They painted the grubby and the drab as well as the hectic and the colorful. These frank and honest painters included Robert Henri, William Glackens, and George Luks. Some critics insultingly called them the Ashcan ("garbage can") School, a label that has endured but is no longer an insult.

One prominent Ashcan painter was John Sloan (1871–1951). Sloan said that he saw the city as a "vast stage set where all sorts of lively business was in progress." His painting *Six O'Clock, Winter* (c. 1912) shows the "lively business" of a New York City rush hour.



SIX O'CLOCK, WINTER, 1912, JOHN SLOAN, THE PHILLIPS COLLECTION



◀ **1869: Russia**  
Leo Tolstoy publishes  
*War and Peace*.

**1876:** Baseball's National  
League is founded.

**1874: France**  
Claude Monet  
gathers Impres-  
sionist painters for  
first exhibition. ▶



**1877:** Thomas Edison  
patents the phonograph.

**1877: England** First tennis  
championship held at Wimbledon.

**1880**

### Mark Twain, the Original Time-Traveler

In his novel, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, Mark Twain places a present-day hero in the distant past. Twain said the idea was inspired by a dream in which he was "a knight errant in armor in the Middle Ages." When the book was published in 1889, *The Boston Herald* raved, "Of all the extraordinary conceits that have germinated in his fruitful imagination, nothing more delicious has ever occurred to Mark Twain than that of running riot among the legendary times of our ancestral race. . . ."

While he must have enjoyed the book's success, Twain probably never imagined its long-term effect. Indeed, the time travel tale—now a familiar device in science fiction—is widely regarded to have begun with Twain's book. Perhaps because of this, many science fiction writers have a fondness for Twain. He often appears as a character in sci-fi books, films, television shows, and comics, including the following brief list of examples:

- *The Riverworld* series by Philip José Farmer
- *To Sail Beyond the Sunset* by Robert A. Heinlein
- *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, "Time's Arrow" episode
- *The Sandman* graphic novel series by Neil Gaiman
- *The Transformers: Evolutions* "Hearts of Steel" comic book series

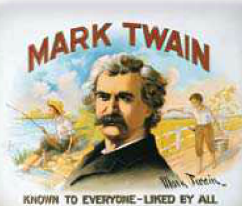


### TIMELINE

**1883:** Railroads adopt standard time zones.

**1880**

**1883:** The Brooklyn Bridge is opened. ▶



◀ **1884:** Mark Twain publishes *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

**1888:** Great mid-March blizzard in eastern United States piles 30-foot drifts in New York's Herald Square.

**1886:** Statue of Liberty dedicated in New York Harbor. ▶



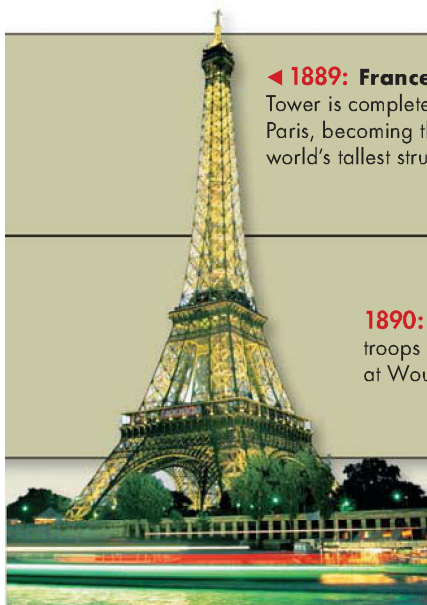


## How did social and political issues lead to Realism and Naturalism?

The war was over. The unthinkable had happened: Americans had tried to slaughter each other. Although the outcome of the war had given the nation a hard-won sense of unity, the enormous cost in human life had shattered the nation's idealism. Like the hero of Stephen Crane's *Red Badge of Courage*, Americans had lost their innocence. The youthful sense of enthusiastic optimism that had built the country had faded away. Frustrated, unfulfilled, young writers turned away from the Romanticism that was popular before the war. They threw away their rose-colored glasses and saw the world for what it was. They became Realists.

**The Common Life** American writers began to focus on creating portrayals of "real life" as ordinary people lived it. They attempted to show characters and events in an honest, objective, almost factual way. In prose, Willa Cather wrote unflinchingly of the loneliness and cultural isolation of life on the prairie. In poetry, Edwin Arlington Robinson created unsparing psychological portraits of a variety of small-town characters. In *Spoon River Anthology*, Edgar Lee Masters presented a disturbingly candid portrait of small-town life in the form of epitaphs spoken by the dead themselves.

**Naturalism** Like Realists, Naturalists also depicted ordinary people in real-life situations, but they took it a step further. They believed that forces far more powerful than any individual shaped human destinies. Indifferent Nature, blind fate, heredity, pure chance—these determined the lives of men and women. Even fierce self-interest was not enough to guarantee success or survival. Jack London, for example, set much of his fiction in the Alaskan wilderness, where the frigid environment was unforgiving. The Naturalist theme of human endurance in the face of overwhelming natural forces pervades his fiction. The atmosphere of urban life fed Naturalism too, as people recognized that industrialization, mechanization, and anonymity were forces against which individuals were increasingly powerless.



◀ **1889: France** Eiffel Tower is completed in Paris, becoming the world's tallest structure.

**1891: England** Thomas Hardy publishes *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. ▶



**1894: Korea** Sino-Japanese War begins; Japanese army defeats Chinese.

**1895**

**1890:** Last major battle between U.S. troops and Native Americans fought at Wounded Knee, South Dakota.

**1892:** Ellis Island opens as a receiving center for immigrants.



## What is the relationship between place and *literature*?

### What elements of the physical environment affected Northern writers' attitudes?

**Industry** The growth of industry in the North radically changed the landscape, and the landscape profoundly affected the thoughts, attitudes, and values of the people. In fact, change itself became a significant value. Technological advances in manufacturing, transportation, and the conveniences of daily life encouraged Northerners to believe that anything bigger, stronger, faster, and newer was necessarily better.

**Urban Life** On the other hand, the increased sizes and populations of Northern cities led to a host of urban problems and discontents. Conflicts arose over the treatment of immigrants, the role of organized labor, and the causes and effects of poverty. Writers were particularly sensitive to what was happening to the spirits—the emotions and values—of people crowded into cities and working at mind-numbing jobs in factories.

### What elements of the physical environment affected Southern writers' attitudes?

**Regionalism** The South of course had cities too, but overall it remained a predominantly rural environment. Agriculture had always been at the heart of the economy, but the war had devastated the plantation system and abolished slavery, radically altering the Southern way of life. Nevertheless, Southern writers focused on the distinctive qualities of their geographical setting. Like writers in other parts of the country, Southern regionalists used the features and color of their local landscapes to tell stories that seemed to grow out of the land itself.

### How did expressions of place show up in literature?

**Local Color** Almost as a conscious national reaction to the Civil War, writers all over the country seemed to realize how precious each separate part of the country could be. In the Northeast, South, Midwest, and West,



#### TIMELINE

1895

**1895: Germany** Wilhelm Roentgen discovers X-rays.

**1896:** *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, Sarah Orne Jewett's masterpiece, is published.

**1898: France** Pierre and Marie Curie discover radium and polonium. ▲

**1895:** First professional football game played in Latrobe, Pennsylvania. ►



**1901: Italy** First transatlantic radio telegraphic message is sent by Marconi.

writers began to feature characters and details that were unique to a particular geographic area. Characters spoke in dialect, linking themselves to a specific locale. Landscapes were so fully integrated into stories that they virtually became characters. Descriptions of customs, clothing, manners, and attitudes all contributed to a literature of local color.

The mining-camp sketches and stories of Bret Harte made the West, especially California, a lively locale in the American literary imagination. Hamlin Garland and Willa Cather found hardship and tragedy, sometimes touched with romance, on the farms of the Midwest. Mark Twain told stories, like *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, that are so deeply entwined with the landscape of the Mississippi River we cannot imagine them happening in any other place. In Maine, Sarah Orne Jewett created delicate and unforgettable New England idylls, and in Louisiana Kate Chopin told wrenchingly realistic stories of life in the bayous.

**Urban Sophistication** Not all realism, however, was set on farms, small towns, and riverboats. Some American writers were also comfortable in elegant drawing rooms. Edith Wharton wrote novels and stories about repressive customs in the Eastern high society into which she had been born. William Dean Howells applied his brand of realism to New England novels of manners and class. Urban subtlety and sophistication found its greatest American analyst in Henry James. Often placing his Americans back in Europe, James probed deeply into characters motivated by complex mixes of desire, honor, ambition, and guilt.

## The American EXPERIENCE

### DEVELOPING AMERICAN ENGLISH

#### Mark Twain and the American Language by Richard Lederer

On February 18, 1885, thirty thousand copies of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* were released, and the novel changed the direction of American letters. Twain used everyday speech instead of formal, standard English. He used seven distinct dialects to reflect the speech patterns of his characters, and he showed the vitality of the American idiom in narrative as well as in dialogue. *Huckleberry Finn* is the first novel of world rank written entirely in American.

#### Readin', Writin', and Twain

Twain held strong opinions about a passel of subjects. Here are a few things he had to say about the American language that he helped to shape.

- *On dialects*: I have traveled more than anyone else, and I have noticed that even the angels speak English with an accent.
- *On choosing words*: The difference between the almost right word and the right word is really a large matter—'tis the difference between the lightning-bug and the lightning.
- *On style* (in a letter to a twelve-year-old): I notice that you use plain, simple language, short words, and brief sentences. That is the way to write English—it is the modern way and the best way. Stick to it; and don't let fluff and flowers and verbosity creep in.

**1903:** Jack London publishes *The Call of the Wild*.

**1903: Spain** Pablo Picasso paints *The Old Guitarist*. ▶

**1903:** Wright Brothers fly 852 feet in their airplane at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina. ▼

**1903:** W.E.B. DuBois publishes *The Souls of Black Folk*, a collection of essays.

**1904:** Russo-Japanese War begins.

**1905**





## What makes American literature *American*?

### What literary elements contributed to an American style?

**Settings and Plots** Unique local settings were essential in creating the “Americanness” of literature during this period. A Civil War battlefield, a Mississippi riverboat, a Western mining town, a Yukon wilderness—these and other sites grounded American literature in truly American places.

**Dialogue and Style** Common speech and dialects contributed to an American style. The way characters talked linked them to specific parts of the country and gave them distinct identities. Straightforward, deliberately “unliterary” speech defined a plain and powerful American style.

**Humor** Mark Twain said, “The humorous story is American.” He felt that a good comic story depended on *how* it was told. Twain and other American writers often used humor to expose corruption and dissect human foibles.

### What roles did writers play in shaping American identity?

**Writer as Realist** During the first half of the nineteenth century, Romantic subjectivity dominated American writing. The adventure tales of Irving and Cooper, the romances and fantasies of Hawthorne and Poe, and the otherworldly quests of Emerson and Melville defined American literature. However, after the horrors of the Civil War, the second half of the century saw the rise of a more objective attitude toward the world and human affairs. Hard fact took on more value than the search for the Transcendentalist Oversoul.

Local color writers such as Bret Harte, Sarah Orne Jewett, and Kate Chopin took great pains to depict details of the places they loved. As a result, their readers came to love those places as well. Local colorists were storytellers—Mark Twain the finest of them all—but they were also documentarians, recording life as it was lived.



▲ 1906: The San Francisco earthquake results in the deaths of at least 3,000 people.

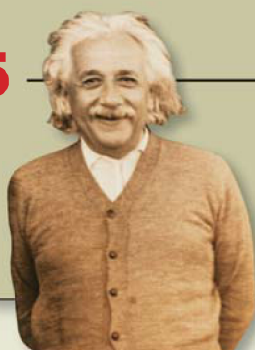


1908: Henry Ford builds the first Model T. ▲

### TIMELINE

1905: **Germany** Albert Einstein proposes his relativity theory. ▼

1905



1906: **Finland** Women's suffrage is granted.

1907: Frank Lloyd Wright hosts his first solo exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago.

1908: The electric washing machine is invented.



These were also the years when a new invention, photography, began to flourish, further feeding the demand for realistic images of life.

**Writer as Naturalist** The writers associated with Naturalism, including Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, and Jack London, were even more detached. They were deeply influenced by the writings of British naturalist Charles Darwin, German political economist Karl Marx, and French novelist Emile Zola, who believed that heredity, environment, and social conditions determined people's actions. To the American Naturalists, Emerson's self-reliance was an illusion, and the role of the writer was to make that clear.

### At the dawn of the twentieth century, what did literature reveal about American attitudes?

**Pragmatism** The American Romantic impulse had faded. The dream-life expressed by Hawthorne and Poe had given way to a hard-edged pragmatism. Melville's Captain Ahab, an obsessive tragic figure on a doomed whaling ship, was succeeded by Twain's Huck Finn, a clear-eyed and clear-headed boy on a raft.

**Loss of Idealism** The Civil War tarnished many of the ideals that had characterized the pre-war nation. In the face of civil war deaths, postwar poverty, urban crowding, and mass production, Emersonian self-reliance lost its relevance. Henry David Thoreau, living alone at Walden and becoming one with nature, was succeeded by Jack London's doomed Yukon camper in "To Build a Fire."

**Democracy** Americans continued to put their faith in democracy. Realism emphasized the common person. It praised the everyday and the ordinary, even at the risk of glorifying mediocrity. Hawthorne's Hester Prynne, an exceptional woman reviled by her community, was succeeded by Edgar Lee Masters' Lucinda Matlock, an ordinary woman in small-town America.

**Science** As the nation entered the twentieth century, science and technology took on ever greater importance. Americans believed in progress and measured it in concrete ways. Over 27 million people visited the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, a massive world's fair that celebrated culture, craft, and commerce. The fair symbolized America's future as a leader in the practical industries that would continue to transform the world and create the Modern Age.



**1909:** A multi-racial group of activists founds the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

**1912:** Over 1,500 people die in the sinking of the *Titanic*. ▶



▶ **1913:** Willa Cather publishes *O Pioneers!*

**1914**

**1914:** The world's first scheduled airline service begins taking flight from St. Petersburg to Tampa.