

Essential Questions of the Literary Period

The American Renaissance [1800–1870]



What is the relationship between place and *literature*?

What did Americans discover as they explored the continent?

Starting as thirteen eastern seaboard colonies, hemmed in by mountain barriers blocking easy access to the interior, the United States gradually extended itself west. The Louisiana Purchase in 1803, the Mexican Cession of 1848, and the additions of Texas and the Oregon Territory filled out the nation and needed to be explored, surveyed, documented, and celebrated.

Size and Diversity Americans were inspired by the sheer size of the land. Vast open prairies in the Midwest, demanding deserts in the Southwest, unbroken forests in the Northwest, grand mountains and canyons in the West—the land ended only at an ocean. Explorers and settlers found countless natural resources. It seemed enough to last forever.

What attitudes developed toward the American land?

Commerce Americans covered the continent in a spirit of acquisition and pride of ownership. The land seemed to demand optimism and practical invention, calling continuously for one more step west. With exploration came exploitation. Commercial possibilities were as wide as the landscape.

Grandeur At the same time, many Americans developed an attitude that went beyond practical matters. The land struck them with awe. To them its spiritual possibilities, not its commercial ones, were as wide as the landscape. Its physical grandeur inspired them to reach for the sublime.

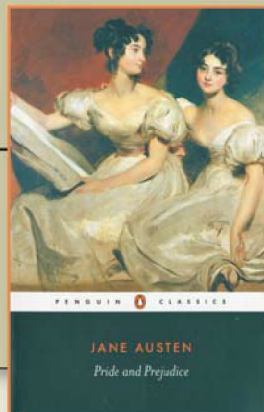


TIMELINE

1813: England Jane Austen publishes *Pride and Prejudice*. ►

1810

1812: U.S. declares war on Great Britain; early battles in War of 1812 are at sea.



▲ **1814:** Bombardment of Fort McHenry inspires Francis Scott Key to write "The Star-Spangled Banner."

How did these attitudes show up in literature?

An American Mythology Explorers such as Meriwether Lewis and Captain William Clark recorded the facts of their expeditions in colorful words and drawings that made the farthest reaches of the continent accessible to every American, at least in imagination. Fiction writers Washington Irving and James Fenimore Cooper helped to create an American mythology by setting tales in the forests, towns, and outposts of the American landscape. In his exciting narrative poems, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow populated the wilderness with colonial Americans, Native Americans, and Revolutionary War heroes.

The American Masters The greatest of American writers—those whose work created the American Renaissance—were all profoundly involved in the American landscape. Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Herman Melville saw the dark side of the wilderness, while Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau emphasized its sublimity. Emily Dickinson explored the universal qualities of her local landscape, while Walt Whitman merged his all-encompassing self with the entire nation.

Nature and Culture The American place affected a wide variety of cultural figures. Thomas Cole and the other Hudson River painters based their work on the romantic and sublime features of the landscape. John James Audubon applied both science and art to American wildlife. Frederick Law Olmsted even found a way to bring nature into the city with his landscape design of New York City's Central Park.

The American EXPERIENCE

CLOSE-UP ON HISTORY

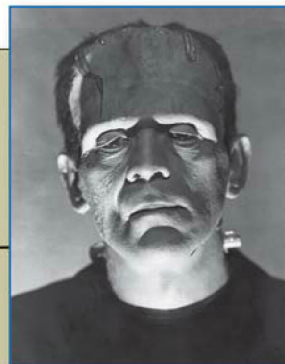
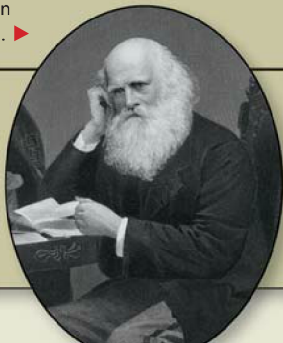
Sacajawea, Guide for Lewis and Clark

In 1804, a Shoshone woman named Sacajawea was staying with the Mandan Indians near present-day Bismarck, North Dakota. Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, who had been asked by President Thomas Jefferson to explore the new lands of the Louisiana Purchase, were spending the winter with the Mandans. Sacajawea offered to guide them in the spring across the Rocky Mountains, where the Shoshones lived. She knew the region well and she could translate for them in their encounters with different Indian tribes.

Sacajawea contributed greatly to the success of the expedition, gathering wild vegetables and advising the men where to fish and hunt. She also knew about the healing qualities of different herbs. When the party reached the mountains, Sacajawea recognized the lands of her people, and she persuaded her relatives to support the expedition with food and horses.

After crossing the Rockies, the explorers reached the west coast and returned to St. Louis in 1806. Thanks largely to Sacajawea, their relations with Indians had been almost entirely peaceful. Sadly, however, the westward movement inspired by the expedition would eventually lead to "Indian removal" and confiscation of Indian lands.

1817: William Cullen Bryant publishes early draft of "Thanatopsis" in a Boston magazine. ▶



1820

1818: England Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley creates a legend with *Frankenstein*. ▲



How does literature shape or reflect *society*?

What social forces shaped America during this period?

Technology Bigger, better, stronger, faster—everything in America was rolling on the fast track, especially on the iron network of railroad tracks that crisscrossed the country. Railroads allowed farmers to get their crops to larger markets, and they made almost every corner of America a potential market. Factories made cities grow, and cities then built more factories. Shipbuilding, fishing, and whaling flourished. Inventions of all kinds made life easier: the telegraph and Morse code, the steamboat, the reaper, vulcanized rubber, powerful looms and lathes, the sewing machine, the elevator. Even the word *technology* was coined during this period.

Democracy As the nineteenth century moved forward in America, the right to vote was still largely restricted to white males who owned land. The election of Andrew Jackson as president and the rise of Jacksonian Democracy, however, signaled the rise of the common man to positions of unprecedented power. It was no longer necessary to be wealthy and highly educated to wield political authority in America. At the same time, the women's rights movement gained momentum, spurred on by the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848. Native Americans, on the other hand, felt the continuing hardship of forced removal from their traditional homelands.

Slavery The institution of slavery remained the most profound controversy in America. Eventually, slavery would be the social and political issue that would have the greatest effect on the lives—and deaths—of Americans.

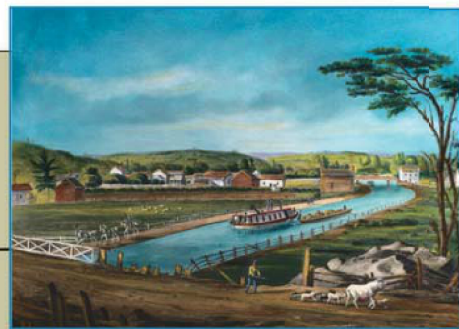
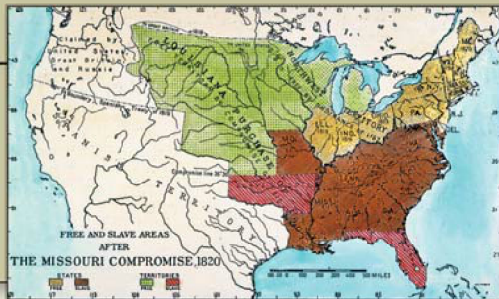
What did nineteenth century Americans read?

Americans had broken away from Britain politically, but they still devoured British literature, including the adventure tales of Walter Scott and the serial novels of Charles Dickens. However, no British author came close in popularity to two Americans. Harriet Beecher Stowe's anti-slavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* became a national—and international—phenomenon, and Longfellow became the best-selling poet in the English language.

TIMELINE

1820: Missouri Compromise bans slavery in parts of new territories. ▼

1820



▲ 1825: Completion and success of Erie Canal spurs canal building throughout the nation.

What did American writers want to achieve?

The Social Vision Thomas Jefferson's vision of America was grand, and the Louisiana Purchase helped make that vision a reality. The reports sent by Lewis and Clark and other explorers encouraged the country's physical, political, and commercial growth. At the same time, American journalism fed the idea that the New World could rival the Old World in every way. In lectures, essays, speeches, debates, pamphlets, editorials, and songs, Americans presented what they thought and felt about women's rights, slavery, treatment of Native Americans, land use, immigration, trade, and taxes. Public writing enabled America to define a public self.

The Romantic Vision Romanticism made clear that exploration of the private self was as important as exploration of the land. In prose and poetry, American writers described individual quests for self-definition. Romantic writers elevated imagination over reason, feeling over fact, and nature above all. The fantastical tales of Washington Irving and Edgar Allan Poe, and the agonized heroes of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville made the Romantic vision an essential part of the American Renaissance.

The Transcendental Vision Literature, philosophy, and religion merged in New England Transcendentalism, producing a native blend that was Romantic, intuitive, and ethically engaged. For Transcendentalists, real truths lay outside sensory experience. Ralph Waldo Emerson explored those truths in brilliant, wide-ranging essays. Henry David Thoreau put his finger on those truths by merging nature writing and spiritual autobiography. Thoreau's *Walden* remains central to American literature.

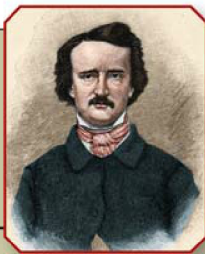
The American EXPERIENCE

A LIVING TRADITION

Walden Pond and Tinker Creek

About 120 years after Thoreau embarked on the experiment of living "alone, in the woods ... on the shore of Walden Pond," Annie Dillard undertook a similar experiment with nature and solitude: "I live by a creek, Tinker Creek, in a valley in Virginia's Blue Ridge." Just as Thoreau wrote *Walden* to describe his experiences, she, too, wrote a book about what she saw and thought, the best-selling *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. Near the beginning of the book, she describes the home base for her observations:

"An anchorite's hermitage [hermit's secluded retreat] is called an anchor-hold; some anchor-holds were simple sheds clamped to the side of a church like a barnacle to a rock. I think of this house clamped to the side of Tinker Creek as an anchor-hold. It holds me at anchor to the rock bottom of the creek itself and it keeps me steadied in the current, as a sea anchor does, facing the stream of light pouring down. It's a good place to live; there's a lot to think about. The creeks—Tinker and Carvin's—are an active mystery, fresh every minute."

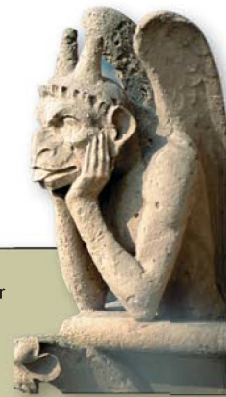


▲ **1827:** Edgar Allan Poe publishes *Tamerlane*, his first collection of poems.

1829: England George Stephenson perfects a steam locomotive for Liverpool-Manchester Railway.



1831: France Victor Hugo publishes *Notre Dame de Paris*. ▶



◀ **1831:** Cyrus McCormick invents mechanical reaper.

1830

The American EXPERIENCE

CONTEMPORARY CONNECTION

EMILY DICKINSON: POET, RECLUSE . . . GAMER?

In 2005, three prominent video game designers set themselves a challenge to create games based on something surprising: the poetry of Emily Dickinson.

Clint Hocking, lead designer of *Splinter Cell*, created a game called *Muse*. Players would collect symbols based on Dickinson's Massachusetts. They would then assemble the symbols to make poems within a certain amount of time.

Peter Molyneux, designer of *Black & White*, created a game using a house modeled on Dickinson's. Players would wander around the house, trying to unlock Dickinson's experiences.

Will Wright, creator of *The Sims*, believes that Dickinson and hi-tech are a natural combination. "If she were alive today," he said, "she'd be an Internet addict, and she'd probably have a really amazing Blog." The game Wright designed would be stored on a USB flash drive. The player and Emily would write to each other. Emily would appear randomly with IMs, e-mails, or desktop appearances. Ultimately, she could delete herself from the memory stick.

Wright's game won the challenge.



TIMELINE

1835

1837: Samuel F.B. Morse patents electromagnetic telegraph. ►



1838: U.S. Army marches Cherokees of Georgia on long "Trail of Tears" to Oklahoma. ►



1841: Antarctica First explored by Englishman James Ross. ►



1842: Asia Hong Kong becomes a British colony.



What makes American literature *American*?

What qualities made American literature sound American?

American English Most Americans, descended from English colonists, spoke English, but gradually the American way of speaking and writing took on many unique features. Dialects, the products of local communities, developed around the country, and local grammar and syntax often drove out standard British English. Spanish, French, Dutch, and Native American languages added to the mix, and Americans coined new words to describe their land, weather, plants, animals, and ways of daily life.

Triumph of the Colloquial American English, both spoken and written, became more colloquial, or informal, than British English. Contractions such as *can't*, *don't*, and *couldn't* were acceptable. Colorful idioms enlivened everyday speech. Americans might *set a spell*, *take a fork in a road*, or *bark up the wrong tree*. The British thought that Americans were ruining the language, but, like the nation itself, American English was intensely alive to change, variety, and new additions.

The "Barbaric Yawp" During the American Renaissance, American writers found their own voices. Emerson, Thoreau, Poe, Dickinson—each contributed to a recognizably American style, but no one sounded as utterly American as Walt Whitman. He was unafraid to sound his "barbaric yawp" across the continent. His style incorporated the plain and the elegant, the high and the low, the foreign and the native. It mixed grand opera, political oratory, journalistic punch, everyday conversation, and biblical cadences. Whitman's sound was the American sound.

What literary character types emerged during this period?

The Frontiersman As the frontier continued to open, the men and women who faced it head-on entered into the nation's literary imagination.

Real-life backwoodsmen such as Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett were mythologized in almanacs and folktales, and Americans delighted in tall tales about



◀ 1845: Ireland

Famine results from failure of potato crop.

1845: Florida

becomes the twenty-seventh state in the United States.



1848: Mexican War ends; United States expands borders.

◀ 1848: Women's Rights Convention held in Seneca Falls, New York.

1848: Belgium Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels publish *The Communist Manifesto*.

1848: Gold Rush begins in California. ▶



1850

the superhuman lumberjack Paul Bunyan, the rowdy riverboat man Mike Fink, and the African American steel-driver John Henry. In fiction, the essential frontiersman was Natty Bumppo, the hero of James Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales*. At one with the wilderness, these hardy characters helped define the American identity as bold, self-reliant, and "uncorrupted" by civilization.

The Romantic Individualist Romanticism emphasized the individual over the institution and the person over the community. The American Romantic hero took many forms. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Nathaniel Hawthorne's Hester Prynne dared to put love and honor over the repressive rule of her town. In *Moby-Dick*, Herman Melville's Captain Ahab let nothing stand in the way of his obsession with the white whale. In *Leaves of Grass*, Walt Whitman's ecstatic self celebrated its own joyful existence at the center of the universe.

The Transcendental Seeker One type of Romantic individualist was the person who sought to reach the sublime, a feeling of oneness with all that is beautiful and good. This private soul craved unity with the Oversoul, a universal force that might be identified as the mind of God. As Emerson wrote, "the individual is the world," and an individual could reach the sublime through the world of nature. Emerson and Thoreau defined this character type, but other writers and artists contributed to the quest for the sublime. Margaret Fuller edited the Transcendentalist magazine, *The Dial*, and the Hudson River school of visual artists painted landscapes that inspired a sense of the sublime in all who saw them.

What literary themes emerged during this era?

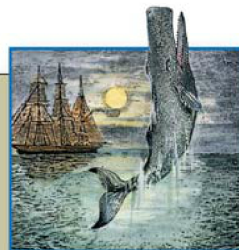
Westering The myth of America began as "a city upon a hill," but by the nineteenth century it had become "the garden of the world." The sheer bulk of the continent, with its treasury of natural resources, made continuous Western expansion a fundamental part of the national identity. Many Americans considered this movement west as a continental destiny. It became the right and duty of Americans to explore, expand, and exploit. However, if America was a garden, it was one being invaded by machines. This is a theme that continues to resonate in American literature.

TIMELINE

1850

1850: Nathaniel Hawthorne publishes *The Scarlet Letter*.

1850: England Elizabeth Barrett Browning publishes *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. ▶



1851: Nathaniel Hawthorne publishes *The House of Seven Gables*.

◀ 1851: Herman Melville publishes *Moby-Dick*.

1851: Australia Gold discovered in New South Wales.

Bright and Dark Romanticism Romanticism had two faces, one bright and optimistic, the other dark and shadowed by evil. Emerson and Thoreau emphasized “the sun is but a morning star” aspect of Romanticism. They saw human beings as fundamentally good. Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville, on the other hand, were deeply disturbed by what they saw in the human heart. They believed that crime, cruelty, guilt, and self-destruction were the true earmarks of human nature. During the American Renaissance, writers explored both sides of the Romantic impulse.

Self-Reliance “Trust thyself,” Emerson advised. Think for yourself, and act on what you think. “Live deliberately,” Thoreau advised. Make your own choices, and do not let others choose for you. These principles had been built into American democracy, and they became fundamental themes of American culture. What applied to individuals also applied to the nation as a whole. The eighteenth century had seen the Declaration of Independence. The nineteenth century saw declarations of cultural independence. Self-reliance is key to why the American Renaissance happened at all. Literary culture had begun to grow; journalism and education prepared the ground. But it was extraordinary individuals who made it happen—self-reliant men and women who thought for themselves and refused to let social, political, religious, or cultural institutions overwhelm them.

The American EXPERIENCE

DEVELOPING AMERICAN ENGLISH

The Truth About O.K. by Richard Lederer

Americans seem to have a passion for stringing initial letters together. We use *A.M.* and *P.M.* to separate light from darkness and *B.C.* and *A.D.* to identify vast stretches of time. We may listen to a deejay or veejay on *ABC* or *MTV*, or a crusading *DA* quoting the *FBI* on *CNN*.

Perhaps the most widely understood American word in the world is *O.K.* The explanations for its origin have been imaginative and various. Some claim that *O.K.* is a version of the Choctaw affirmative *okeh*. Others assert that it is short for the Greek *olla kalla* (“all good”) or *Orrin Kendall* crackers or chief *Old Keukuk*.

The truth is that in the 1830s there was a craze for initialisms, like our currently popular *T.G.I.F.* and *F.Y.I.* The fad went so far as to generate letter combinations of intentional misspellings: *K.Y.* for “know use,” *O.W.* for “oll wright,” *O.K.* for “oll korrekt” followed.

Ultimately, *O.K.* survived because of a presidential nickname. President Martin Van Buren was born in Kinderhook, New York, and dubbed “Old Kinderhook.” “*O.K.*” became the rallying cry of the Old Kinderhook Club that supported him for reelection in 1840. Van Buren was defeated, but the word honoring his name remains what H. L. Mencken identified as “the most shining and successful Americanism ever invented.”



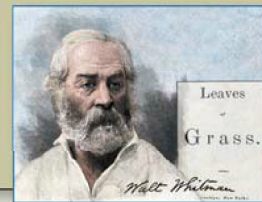
▲ **1852:** Harriet Beecher Stowe publishes *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

1854: Henry David Thoreau publishes *Walden*. ▼



1855: England
Robert Browning publishes *Men and Women*.

1855: Walt Whitman publishes *Leaves of Grass*. ►



1858: Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas run for Illinois Senate seat and conduct a series of famous debates.

1870