

Introduction to American Literature
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By

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Lecture One: General and Brief Introduction to American Literature

In the beginning, America was a series of British colonies on the east coast of the present-day United States. Therefore, its literary tradition begins with the tradition of English literature. However, very quickly unique American characteristics and the breadth of its production began to develop an American writing tradition.

Some consider Captain John Smith to be the first American author, when he wrote *The General Historie of Virginia, New England, and the Summer Isles* (1624)

Similar writers of interest include Daniel Cox, John Hammond, Gabriel Thomas, George Percy, Daniel Denton, Thomas Ash, John Lawson and William Strachey.

Poetry was also written in those early days, Nicholas Noyes wrote *Doggerel* verse.

Edward Taylor and Anne Bradstreet were popular, and Michael Wigglesworth was known for his best selling poem *The Day of Doom*.

It is almost impossible for the history of the early American settlers not to be mainly about religious questions that were rich topics for their early writings. A journal written by John Winthrop discussed the religious foundations of the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

[Jonathan Edwards](#) and [Cotton Mather](#) represented the [Great Awakening](#), a religious revival in the early 18th century that asserted strict **Calvinism** (**Calvinism** is a [theological](#) system and an approach to the Christian life that emphasizes God's sovereignty in all things). Other **Puritan** and **religious** writers include [Thomas Hooker](#) and [Samuel Willard](#).

The Colonial Period of American Literature spans the time between the founding of the first settlement at Jamestown to the outbreak of the Revolution. The writings of this time centered on religious, practical, or historical themes. The most influential writers of the Colonial Period include [John Winthrop](#), [Cotton Mather](#), [Benjamin Franklin](#), and [Anne Bradstreet](#).

During the Revolutionary Age, 1765-1790, some of the **greatest documents** of American history were authored. In 1776, [Thomas Paine](#) authored [Common Sense](#) and [Thomas Jefferson](#) wrote [The Declaration of Independence](#). In 1781, [The Articles of Confederation](#) were ratified. Between 1787 and 1788, [Alexander Hamilton](#), [James Madison](#), and [John Jay](#) wrote [The Federalist Papers](#). Finally, in 1787, [The Constitution of the United States](#) was drafted and in 1789 it was ratified.

The Early National Period of American Literature saw the beginnings of literature that could be truly identified as "American". The writers of this new American literature wrote in the English style, but **the settings, themes, and characters were authentically American**. In addition, poets of this time wrote [poetry](#) that was relatively independent of English precursors. Three of the most recognized writers of this time are [Washington Irving](#), [James Cooper](#), and [Edgar Allan Poe](#).

The period 1828-1865 in American literature is commonly identified as the Romantic Period in America, but may also be referred to as the American Renaissance or the Age of Transcendentalism. The writers of this period produced works of originality and excellence that helped shape the ideas, ideals, and literary aims of many American writers. Writers of the American Romantic Period include Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Emily Dickinson, and Walt Whitman.

Following the Civil War, American Literature entered into the Realistic Period. The major form of literature produced in this era was realistic fiction. Unlike romantic fiction, realistic fiction aims to represent life as it really is and make the reader believe that the characters actually might exist and the situations might actually happen. In order to have this effect on the reader, realistic fiction focuses on the ordinary and commonplace. The major writers of the Realistic Period include [Mark Twain](#), [Henry James](#), [Bret Harte](#), and [Kate Chopin](#).

Most critics hold that the history of American literature can be divided into six periods: orderly, colonial period, romanticism, realism, naturalism, modernism and post-modernism.

Although American literature in its true sense did not begin until the 19th century, however, we always talk about colonial period as a preparatory introduction to American literature.

American Literature (Periods of American Literature)	
A. 1607-1776 : Colonial Period	<p>The years 1900-1914 mark American Literature's Naturalistic Period. Naturalism claims to give an even more accurate depiction of life than realism. In accordance with a post-Darwinian thesis, naturalistic writers hold that the characters of their works are merely higher-order animals whose character and behavior is entirely based upon heredity and environment. Naturalistic writings try to present subjects with scientific objectivity. These writings are often frank, crude, and tragic. Stephen Crane, Jack London, and Theodore Dreiser are the most studied American Naturalists.</p>
A. 1765-1790 : The Revolutionary Age	
A. 1775-1828 : The Early National Period	
A. 1828-1865 : The Romantic Period (Also known as: The American Renaissance or The Age of Transcendentalism)	
A. 1865-1900 : The Realistic Period	
A. 1900-1914 : The Naturalistic Period	
A. 1914-1939 : American Modernist Period	
A. 1920s, 1930s : Jazz Age, Harlem Renaissance, and the "Lost Generation"	
A. 1939-present : The Contemporary Period	
A. 1950s : Beat Writers	
A. 1960s, 1970s : Counterculture and Ethnic Literature	

A. Between 1914 and 1939, American Literature entered into a phase which is still referred to as "**The Beginnings of Modern Literature**". Like their British counterparts, the American Modernists experimented with subject matter, form, and style and produced achievements in all literary genres. Some well-known American Modernist Poets include [Robert Frost](#), [William Carlos Williams](#), [Edna St. Vincent Millay](#), and [E.E. Cummings](#). Included among American Modernist Prose Writers are [Edith Wharton](#), [Sinclair Lewis](#), and [Willa Cather](#).

The American Modernist Period also produced many other writers that are considered to be writers of Modernist Period Subclasses. For example, [F. Scott Fitzgerald](#) is considered a writer of [The Jazz Age](#), [Langston Hughes](#) and [W.E.B. DuBois](#) writers of [The Harlem Renaissance](#), and [Gertrude Stein](#), [T.S. Eliot](#), [Ezra Pound](#), and [Ernest Hemingway](#) writers of [The Lost Generation](#).

Notable Years in U.S. History from 1492-2004	
1492	Christopher Columbus sails across the Atlantic Ocean and reaches an island in the Bahamas in the Caribbean Sea.
1607	Jamestown, Virginia , the first English settlement in North America, is founded by Captain John Smith
1619	The first African slaves are brought to Jamestown . (Slavery is made legal in 1650.)
1664	The English seize New Amsterdam from the Dutch. The city is renamed New York .
1764-1766	England places taxes on sugar that comes from their North American colonies. England also requires colonists to buy stamps to help pay for royal troops
1770	Boston Massacre : English troops fire on a group of people protesting English taxes.
1776	The Declaration of Independence is approved.
1787	The Constitutional Convention meets to write a Constitution for the U.S.
1812-1814	War of 1812 : U.S. declares war on Britain over British interference with American maritime shipping and westward expansion. British capture Washington, DC, and set fire to White House and Capitol (Aug. 1814).
1846-1848	Mexican War : U.S. declares war on Mexico in effort to gain California and other territory in Southwest.
1860	Abraham Lincoln is elected president
1861-1865	The American Civil War (1861–1865).
1890	National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) is founded, with Elizabeth Cady Stanton as president.
1939-1945	World War II : U.S. declares its neutrality in European conflict.
1950-1953	Korean War : Cold war conflict between Communist and non-Communist forces on Korean Peninsula. North Korean communists invade South Korea. President Truman, without the approval of Congress, commits American troops to battle.
1950-1975	Vietnam War: Prolonged conflict between Communist forces of North Vietnam, backed by China and the USSR, and non-Communist forces of South Vietnam, backed by the United States.
1990	Iraqi troops invade Kuwait, leading to the Persian Gulf War (Aug. 2).
1992	Following the breakup of the Soviet Union in Dec. 1991, President Bush and Russian president Boris Yeltsin meet at Camp David and formally declare an end to the cold war (Feb. 1).
2001	Two hijacked jetliners ram twin towers of World Trade Center in worst. More than 3,000 people die in the attacks (Sept. 11). U.S. and Britain launch air attacks against targets in Afghanistan after Taliban government fails to hand over Saudi terrorist Osama bin Laden , the suspected mastermind behind the Sept. 11 attacks.
2004	The U.S. returns sovereignty to an interim government in Iraq.

Lecture Two: Colonial Literature (The Puritan Period)

American Colonial Literature:

The immigration of the Pilgrims to New England occurred in stages. But that they had to go somewhere became apparent soon enough. Theirs was the position of the Separatist: they believed that the reforms of the Anglican church had not gone far enough, that, although the break with Catholicism in 1535 had moved some way toward the Puritan belief in and idea of religious authority grounded solely in Scripture.

But theirs was a religious, not a political agenda; moral and theological principles were involved, and from their perspective, there could be no compromise.

To establish themselves as rightful interpreters of the Bible independent of an inherited social and cultural order, they removed from the Anglican Church in order to re-establish it as they believed it truly should be. This of course meant leaving the country, and they left for Holland in 1608 and for the New World in 1620.

- American Colonial literature refers to the writings that emerged from the original U.S. colonies during the period from 1607 to the late 1700s.
- It was largely influenced by British writers and was created to inform people about Puritans' life, religious disputes, and settlement issues.
- Many of the characteristics of Colonial American literature can be found in the poems, journals, letters, narratives, histories and teaching materials written by settlers, religious figures and historical icons of the period.
- Genres that the Puritans favored:
 - Sermons
 - religious poetry
 - historical narratives
 - THEY DID NOT FEEL THAT LITERATURE WAS FOR ENTERTAINMENT. Novels and plays were frowned upon, due to a perceived lack of practical religious value.


How did religion shape the literature of the Puritan period?

- We will look into themes, formats, and purposes of the Puritan writers to answer this question.

The Puritans wrote about the religious foundations of many of their settlements, especially the exodus from Britain, and employed the constant theme that God should be worshipped. They also used texts that prepared them for worship. This literature helped spread the message of God, suggesting that "life was a test" and the soul would face damnation if that test was failed. Ambition and hard work were continuously stressed. Many of the Puritan works were written in poetry form. Anne Bradstreet's poetry, the "Bay Psalm Book," and Pastor Edward Taylor's "Preparatory Mediations" are good examples of religious texts of the era.

So, when was the Puritan Part of the Colonial Period?

- Early 1600's to about 1750 or so.
- The reason we call this part of the Colonial Period (which represents all of the time that the British ruled the colonies in North America) the PURITAN period is because of the overarching influence of the Puritans and their specific religious practices.
- In 1620, a hundred or so English men and women settled in Plymouth, Massachusetts, fleeing from religious persecution.
- An example of such persecution:
- One Englishman who had written a pamphlet to reform the Church of England was put in jail, fined, whipped, had the top of his ears cut off, his forehead burned with a hot iron, and his nose slit.

Puritan DIVINE MISSION	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ John Winthrop▪ “We shall be as a City upon a Hill, the eyes of all people are upon us; so that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken and so cause him to withdraw his present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through all the world.”▪ From his <i>Bay Colony Journal</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ John Winthrop 

Puritan Thought:

- Three Puritan Principles
- 1- They wished to have their feelings changed through God's grace. They wanted to be cleansed of envy, vanity, and lust.
- 2- They valued plainness—simplicity, especially in church.
- 3- They saw their bringing Christianity to America as a divine mission.

Puritan terms and influences

- Predestination: the idea that God knows where each person will end up in eternity.
- The Puritans believed that those who were blessed with wealth and prosperous family lives were a part of those “elected” to go to heaven.
- This concept can be seen in “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” by Jonathan Edwards.

Puritan terms and influences

- Protestant work ethic: The Puritans believed that hard work was a way of winning God's favor, and wealth accumulated through hard, honest work was seen as a sign of Godliness and was encouraged of all Puritans.
- This "protestant work ethic" is a major foundation of the American way of life.
- Plain style: Believe it or not, William Bradford (Of Plymouth Plantation) is well known for his plain style.
- This simply means that his prose is not ornamental, and is not intended to be showy.
- This falls in line with the Puritan belief that one should not call attention to oneself.
- This is opposite of Shakespeare, whose writing in England was very showy and meant to showcase his skill as a writer.

How did religion shape the literature of the Puritan period?

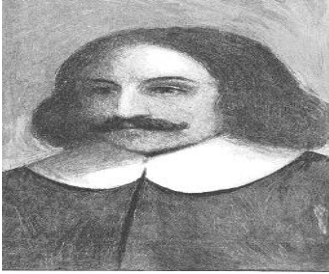
- Religious values were put above all else in every area of these people's lives.
- This led to a focus on practical literature (sermons, hist. narrative, poetry with a spiritual message).
- This also led to a certain style of writing that mirrored the Puritans style of living. (plain style)
- Themes were religious in nature and reflected Puritan values.

The Puritan 10 Commandments

- 1) Thou shalt not miss church and community meetings.
- 2) Thou shalt work hard and support my fellow pilgrims.
- 3) Thou shalt worship a strict and Christian God.
- 4) Thou shalt put the Lord first in my life and obey his words.
- 5) Thou shalt live by the 10 Commandments as written in the Holy Bible.
- 6) Thou shalt not dress in bright colors or dance in a wicked manner.
- 7) Thou shalt not perform witchery nor conjure the devil.
- 8) Thou shalt not have any opinions or beliefs not held by the entire community.
- 9) Thou shalt build my home simply and not clutter it with decorations.
- 10) Thou whom shalt disobey these commandments will be banished or be hanged.

Puritan Writers to remember

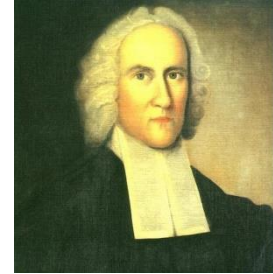
- William Bradford Of Plymouth Plantation (HISTORICAL NARRATIVE)



- Anne Bradstreet "Upon the Burning of Our House," and "To My Dear and Loving Husband." (POETRY)



- Jonathan Edwards "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" (SERMON)



Puritan Writing

The Purpose of Literature is To Educate

Examples on Anne Bradstreet's Poetry

"Dialogue Between Old England and New"

by Anne Bradstreet

New England

Alas, dear Mother, fairest Queen and best,
 With honour, wealth, and peace happy and blest,
 What ails thee hang thy head, and cross thine arms,
 And sit i' the dust to sigh these sad alarms?
 What deluge of new woes thus over-whelm
 The glories of thy ever famous Realm?
 What means this wailing tone, this mournful guise?
 Ah, tell thy Daughter; she may sympathize.

Dear Mother: England

Thy Daughter: America

"For Deliverance From A Fever"

by Anne Bradstreet

O, heal my Soul, thov know'st I said,
 Tho' flesh consume to novght;
 What tho' in dust it shall bee lay'd,
 To Glory't shall bee brovght.
 Thou heardst, thy rod thou didst remove,
 And spar'd my Body frail,
 Thou shew'st to me thy tender Love,
 My heart no more might quail.
 O, Praises to my mighty God,
 Praise to my Lord, I say,
 Who hath redeem'd my Soul from pitt:
 Praises to him for Aye!

Commentary: Bradstreet is relieved that God has delivered her from her fever. Early in the poem, she clearly expresses her fear of God's displeasure and vows to accept her death as a pathway to God's glory, she seems extremely relieved to that He allows her to live.

Lecture 3: American Romanticism and Transcendentalism

American Romanticism

Romanticism became popular in American politics, philosophy and art. The movement appealed to the revolutionary spirit of America as well as to those longing to break free of the strict religious traditions of early settlement. The Romantics rejected rationalism and religious intellect. It appealed to those in opposition of Calvinism, which includes the belief that the destiny of each individual is preordained. The Romantic movement gave rise to New England [Transcendentalism](#) which portrayed a less restrictive relationship between God and Universe. The new philosophy presented the individual with a more personal relationship with God. Transcendentalism and Romanticism appealed to Americans in a similar fashion, for both privileged feeling over reason, individual freedom of expression over the restraints of tradition and custom. It often involved a rapturous response to nature. It encouraged the rejection of harsh, rigid Calvinism, and promised a new blossoming of American culture.

Transcendentalism

- Proposes a belief in a higher reality than that found in sense experience or in a higher kind of knowledge than that achieved by human reason.
- Suggests that every individual is capable of discovering this higher truth on his or her own, through intuition.
- Transcendentalism was strongly influenced by Deism, which although rationalist, was opposed to Calvinist orthodoxy.
- Deists hold that a certain kind of religious knowledge is either inherent in each person or accessible through the exercise of reason.
- Transcendentalism also involved a rejection of strict Puritan religious attitudes
- Unlike the Puritans, the Transcendentalists saw humans and nature as possessing an innate goodness.

The Influence of Romanticism

- The celebration of:
 - individualism
 - the beauty of nature
 - the virtue of humankind
- Elevation of the human mind in a way that can reach the sublime—God
- --Nature and the Oversoul:
 - Transcendentalist writers expressed semi-religious feelings toward nature
 - They saw a direct connection between the universe & the individual soul

- Divinity permeated all objects, animate or inanimate
- The purpose of human life was union with the “Oversoul” – a sort of convergence of the individual, God & Nature

Transcendentalist Beliefs	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Intuition, not reason, is the highest human faculty ✓ A rejection of materialism ✓ Simplicity is the path to spiritual greatness ✓ Nature is a source of truth & inspiration ✓ Non-conformity, individuality & self-reliance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ --Major Transcendentalist Work: ▪ Ralph Waldo Emerson -“Self-Reliance” 1841 ▪ Henry David Thoreau -Walden 1854 -“Civil Disobedience”

More Transcendentalists

Here is a list of the authors below with their major works and importance:

- - Edgar Allan Poe- "Narrative of Arthur Gordon Rym", "A Tell Tale Heart", "The Raven", inventor of the American short short, known for his Gothic writings, and viewed the countryside as a phantasm or an illusionary mental image.
- Washington Irving-"Rip Van Winkle", "Sleepy Hollow", is the father of American Literature, saw the country as a escape from city life, and fought for copyright infringement laws for authors.
- Walt Whitman- the controversial "Leaves of Grass", "Franklin Evans", one of the bridge poets between American Romanticism and the 20th century.
- Harriet Beecher Stowe- *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. the "little lady who started the Civil War" and kept European nations from aiding the south in the Civil War.
- James Fenimore Cooper- *The Last of the Mohicans* and was the father of the American novel.
- Emily Dickinson- "is My verse...alive", one of the bridge poets between American Romanticism and the 20th century.

Anti-Transcendentalists

- Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville
- Both explore the darker side of nature and human nature
- Both consider life in its tragic dimension, a combination of good and evil.
- Transcendentalists believed that humanity was Godlike and saw the world in which only good existed
- They chose to focus on the positive rather than evil & darkness.

“Self-Reliance” – Emerson

- “There is a time in every man’s education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide...”
- “Trust thyself...”
- “Whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist.”
- “Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind.”
- -“No law can be sacred to me but that of my own nature. Good and bad are but names very readily transferable to that or this; the only right is what is after my constitution; the only wrong what is against it...”

Quotations by Emerson

“Speak what you think now in hard words and tomorrow speak what tomorrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict every thing you said today. – ‘Ah, so you shall be sure to be misunderstood.’ – Is it so bad then to be misunderstood? Pythagoras was misunderstood, and Socrates, and Jesus, and Luther, and Copernicus, and Galileo, and Newton, and every pure and wise spirit that ever took flesh. To be great is to be misunderstood.”

- “I hate quotations. Tell me what you know.”
- “All life is an experiment. The more experiments you make the better.”
- “The only way to have a friend is to be one.”
- "To finish the moment, to find the journey's end in every step of the road, to live the greatest number of good hours, is wisdom."
- “The reward of a thing well done, is to have done it.”
- “What lies behind us and what lies before us are small matters compared to what lies within us.”
- “Make yourself necessary to someone.”

Lecture 4: American Realism

The Age of Realism (1865-1910)

- ❖ A. As a literary movement, realism came in the latter half of the 19th century as a reaction against “the lie” of Romanticism and sentimentalism.
- ❖ B. It expressed the concern for the world of experience, of the commonplace, and for the familiar and the low.
- ❖ William Dean Howells: he must write what he observed and knew
- ❖ Henry James: Life should be the main object of the novel.
- ❖ Mark Twain: writers should keep in their mind the soul, the life, and the speech of the people.

- ❖ C. In matters of style, there was contrast between the genteel and graceful prose on the one hand, and the vernacular diction, rough and ready frontier humor on the other.
- ❖ D. The American authors lumped together as “realists” seem to have some features in common:
 - ❖ a. “verisimilitude of detail derived from observation”
 - ❖ b. an objective rather than an idealized view of nature and experience
- ❖ E. William Dean Howells, Henry James and Mark Twain as the representatives

The Definition of Literary Realism

- ❖ Broadly defined as "the faithful representation of reality" or "verisimilitude," realism is a literary technique practiced by many schools of writing.
- ❖ Although strictly speaking, realism is a technique, it also denotes a particular kind of subject matter, especially the representation of middle-class life.
- ❖ A reaction against romanticism, an interest in scientific method, the systematizing of the study of documentary history, and the influence of rational philosophy all affected the rise of realism.
- ❖ According to William Harmon and Hugh Holman, "Where romanticists transcend the immediate to find the ideal, and naturalists plumb the actual or superficial to find the scientific laws that control its actions, realists center their attention to a remarkable degree on the immediate, the here and now, the specific action, and the verifiable consequence" (A Handbook to Literature 428).

Characteristics of Realism

- ❖ Renders reality closely and in comprehensive detail. Selective presentation of reality with an emphasis on verisimilitude, even at the expense of a well-made plot
- ❖ Character is more important than action and plot; complex ethical choices are often the subject.
- ❖ Characters appear in their real complexity of temperament and motive; they are in explicable relation to nature, to each other, to their social class, to their own past.
- ❖ Class is important; the novel has traditionally served the interests and aspirations of an insurgent middle class.
- ❖ Events will usually be plausible. Realistic novels avoid the sensational, dramatic elements of naturalistic novels and romances.
- ❖ Diction is natural vernacular, not heightened or poetic; tone may be comic, satiric, or matter-of-fact.
- ❖ Objectivity in presentation becomes increasingly important: overt authorial comments or intrusions diminish as the century progresses.
- ❖ Interior or psychological realism a variant form.

- ❖ The realism of James and Twain was critically acclaimed in twentieth century; Howellsian realism fell into disfavor as part of early twentieth century rebellion against the "genteel tradition." (from Richard Chase, *The American Novel and Its Tradition*)

Common Themes and Elements in Realism

Pragmatism

literature of the common-place

attempts to represent real life

ordinary people--poor and middle class

ordinary speech in dialect--use of vernacular

recent or contemporary life

subject matter presented in an unidealized, unsentimentalized way

democratic function of literature

social criticism--effect on audience is key

presents indigenous American life

importance of place--regionalism, "local color"

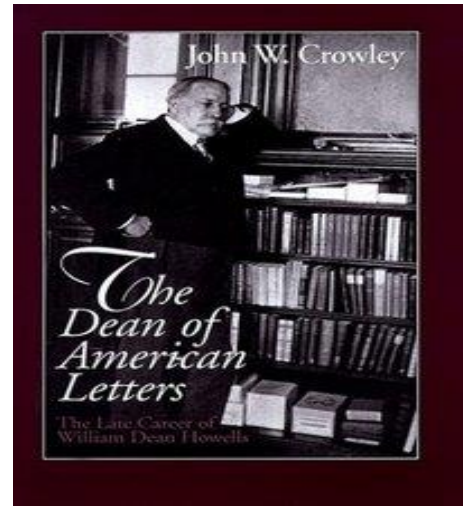
sociology and psychology

William Dean Howells (1837-1920)

- ❖ 1. Literary Status
- ❖ Dean of American literary Realism/ "the father of American Realism."
- ❖ Novelist, dramatist, poet, critic, journalist, editor (of *Atlantic Monthly*)
- ❖ he broke new grounds which led to the achievements of Mark Twain and Henry James.
- ❖ In Howells' view, writing should be "simple, natural, and honest" and should not delve into "romantic exaggeration."
- ❖ His famous definition of the function of a writer indicates his limitations as a Realist writer : "Our novelists, therefore, concern themselves with the more smiling aspects of life...and seek the universal in the individual rather than the social interests."
- ❖ 2. Life and Career
- ❖ the son of a journalist, born at Martin's Ferry, Ohio; adopted journalism as a profession, produced a popular *Life of Lincoln*, and from 1861 to 1865 was Consul at Venice; resuming journalism he became a contributor to the best American papers and magazines, and was for a number of years editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* and *Harpers*; as a well-known and popular novelist, he is witty, graceful, and acute.

The Rise of Silas Lapham (1885) by William Howells

❖ The Rise of Silas Lapham is a [novel](#) written by [William Dean Howells](#) in 1885 about the [materialistic](#) rise of Silas Lapham from [rags to riches](#), and his ensuing [moral](#) susceptibility. Silas earns a fortune in the paint business, but he lacks social standards, which he tries to attain through his daughter's marriage to the [aristocratic](#) Corey family. Silas's morality does not fail him. He loses his money but makes the right moral decision when his partner proposes the unethical selling of the mills to English settlers.



Some Works on Realism

Mark Twain [Huckleberry Finn](#)

[Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offenses](#), [A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court](#)

Bret Harte, short fiction [Selected Stories of Bret Harte](#) "[The Outcasts of Poker Flat](#)" "[The Luck Roaring Camp](#)"

Ambrose Bierce, fiction [Tales of Soldiers and Civilian \(1891\)](#)

William Dean Howells, fiction, essays *A Modern Instance (1882)*, [The Rise of Silas Lapham](#), *A Hazard of New Fortunes*

Henry James, fiction "[Daisy Miller](#)," *Portrait of A Lady*, [The American](#), [The Turn of the Screw](#)

Edith Wharton, fiction [The House of Mirth](#), [Ethan Frome](#), [The Age of Innocence](#)

Kate Chopin, fiction, [The Awakening](#)

George Washington Cable, fiction, [The Grandissimes](#), [Old Creole Days](#)

Joel Chandler Harris, fiction, [Uncle Remus stories](#)

Charles Chestnutt, fiction, [The Conjure Woman \(1899\)](#), [The House Behind the Cedars \(1900\)](#) "[The Goophered Grapevine](#)," "[The Passing of Grandison](#)"

Paul Lawrence Dunbar, poet

Hamlin Garland, fiction "[Under the Lion's Paw](#)"

Lecture 5: Naturalism in American Literature

Naturalism

- Naturalism is NOT "hippie-fiction."
- It is more pessimistic than Realism, primarily.
- The Naturalist writers believed that larger forces were at work: Nature, Fate, and Heredity.
- Their writing was inspired by hardships, whether it was war, the frontier, or urbanization.

- literary movement that was an extension of Realism. It depicts real people in real situations like realism, but believed that forces larger than the individual—nature, fate, heredity—shaped individual destiny.
- Although naturalism is often associated with realism, which also seeks to accurately represent human existence, the two movements are differentiated by the fact that naturalism is connected to the doctrine of biological, economic, and social determinism.
- The term naturalism was initially coined by Emile Zola, the renowned French author who is also credited as a key figure in the development of French literary naturalism.
- American writers were particularly influenced by the British and French models and began to adapt the form to reflect American social, economic, and cultural conditions.
- Viewed as a combination of realism and romanticism, critics contend that the American form is heavily influenced by the concept of determinism—the theory that heredity and environment influence and determine human behavior.

Naturalism - Characteristics	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • characters: 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Themes:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – usually ill-educated or lower-classes – life governed by the forces of heredity, instinct, passion, or the environment – the criminal, the fallen, the down-and-out 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Survival (man against nature, man against himself) – Determinism (nature as an indifferent force on the lives of human beings) – Violence

Themes in more Detail:

1. Charles Walcott, an American critic, identifies survival, determinism, violence, and taboo as key themes.
2. The "brute within" each individual, composed of strong and often warring emotions: passions, such as lust, greed, or the desire for dominance or pleasure; and the fight for survival in an amoral, indifferent universe. The conflict in naturalistic novels is often "man against nature" or "man against himself" as characters struggle to retain a "veneer of civilization" despite external pressures that threaten to release the "brute within."
3. The forces of heredity and environment as they affect--and afflict--individual lives.
4. Nature as an indifferent force acting on the lives of human beings. The romantic vision of Wordsworth--that "nature never did betray the heart that loved her"--here becomes Stephen Crane's view in "The Open Boat": "This tower was a giant, standing with its back to the plight of the ants. It represented in a degree, to the correspondent, the serenity of nature amid the struggles of the individual--nature in the wind, and nature in the vision of men. She did not seem cruel to him then, nor beneficent, nor treacherous, nor wise. But she was indifferent, flatly indifferent."

5. An indifferent, deterministic universe. Naturalistic texts often describe the futile attempts of human beings to exercise free will, often ironically presented, in this universe that reveals free will as an illusion.

Characteristics:

Setting. Frequently an urban setting, as in Norris's *McTeague*.

Techniques and plots. Walcutt says that the naturalistic novel offers "clinical, panoramic, slice-of-life" drama that is often a "chronicle of despair". The novel of degeneration--Zola's *L'Assommoir* and Norris's *Vandover and the Brute*, for example--is also a common type.

“Literature of Discontent”

- Along the lines of Naturalism, the social problems of this period were seen as a force to deal with.
- Many groups, from women to freed slaves, started expressing their discontent with the way things were.
- They started addressing these issues in their writing.
- In their short fiction, naturalist writers strive to depict life accurately through an exploration of the causal factors that have shaped a character's life as well as a deterministic approach to the character's thoughts and actions.
- Therefore, instead of free will, a naturalist depicts a character's actions as determined by environmental forces.

The Emergence of Naturalism

- in the late nineteenth century, industrialization, urbanization, mechanization, and an influx of immigrants from all over the world resulted in extreme changes on the American landscape.
- The short fiction of American literary naturalism depicts the experiences of impoverished and uneducated people living in squalor and struggling to survive in a harsh, indifferent world.
- Major thematic concerns of the form include the fight for survival—man against nature and man against society; violence; the waste of individual potential because of the conditioning forces of life; and man's struggle with his animalistic, base instincts.
- As a result, the short stories of this literary movement are often regarded as depressing, slice-of-life documentations of sad, unfulfilled lives. A handful of significant American authors, such as Stephen Crane, Theodore Dreiser, and Frank Norris, utilized the form, which noticeably declined in popularity by the early twentieth century. Critics note, however, the literary movement's continuing influence on contemporary American authors.

NATURALISM IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

Definition:

The term naturalism describes a type of literature that attempts to apply scientific principles of objectivity and detachment to its study of human beings. Unlike realism, which focuses on literary technique, naturalism implies a philosophical position: for naturalistic writers, since human beings are, in Emile Zola's phrase, "human beasts," characters can be studied through their relationships to their surroundings. Other influences on American naturalists include Herbert Spencer and Joseph LeConte.

The Naturalistic Novel

- The naturalistic novel usually contains two tensions or contradictions, and . . . the two in conjunction comprise both an interpretation of experience and a particular aesthetic recreation of experience. In other words, the two constitute the theme and form of the naturalistic novel.
- The first tension is that between the subject matter of the naturalistic novel and the concept of man which emerges from this subject matter.
- The naturalist populates his novel primarily from the lower middle class or the lower class. . . . His fictional world is that of the commonplace and unheroic in which life would seem to be chiefly the dull round of daily existence, as we ourselves usually conceive of our lives.
- But the naturalist discovers in this world those qualities of man usually associated with the heroic or adventurous, such as acts of violence and passion which involve sexual adventure or bodily strength and which culminate in desperate moments and violent death.
- A naturalistic novel is thus an extension of realism only in the sense that both modes often deal with the local and contemporary. The naturalist, however, discovers in this material the extraordinary and excessive in human nature.
- The second tension involves the theme of the naturalistic novel. The naturalist often describes his characters as though they are conditioned and controlled by environment, heredity, instinct, or chance. But he also suggests a compensating humanistic value in his characters or their fates which affirms the significance of the individual and of his life. The tension here is that between the naturalist's desire to represent in fiction the new, discomfiting truths which he has found in the ideas and life of his late nineteenth-century world, and also his desire to find some meaning in experience which reasserts the validity of the human enterprise.
- In George Becker's famous and much-annotated and contested phrase, naturalism's philosophical framework can be simply described as "pessimistic materialistic determinism."

Practitioners

Edith Wharton; "The House of Mirth" (1905)

Ellen Glasgow; "Barren Ground" (1925) (

John Dos Passos (1896-1970), U.S.A. trilogy (1938): The 42nd Parallel (1930), 1919 (1932), and The Big Money (1936)

James T. Farrell (1904-1979), Studs Lonigan (1934)

John Steinbeck (1902-1968), The Grapes of Wrath (1939)

Richard Wright, Native Son (1940), Black Boy (1945)

Norman Mailer (1923-2007), The Naked and the Dead (1948)

Other writers sometimes identified as naturalists:

Sherwood Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919)

Abraham Cahan, *The Making of an American Citizen*

Rebecca Harding *Davis*

William Faulkner

Henry Blake Fuller, *The Cliff-Dwellers*

Hamlin Garland, *Rose of Dutcher's Coolly*

Robert Herrick, *The Memoirs of an American Citizen* (1905)

Ernest Hemingway

E. W. Howe, *The Story of a Country Town*

Lecture 6: American Modernism

What is Modernism?

Modernism was a cultural wave that originated in Europe and swept the United States during the early 20th century. Modernism impacted music, art and literature by radically undoing traditional forms, expressing a sense of modern life as a sharp break from the past and its rigid conventions. In literature, the elements of modernism are thematic, formal and stylistic.

Characteristics of Modernism:

- Marked by a strong and intentional break with tradition. This break includes a strong reaction against established religious, political, and social views.
- Belief that the world is created in the act of perceiving it; that is, the world is what we say it is.
- There is no such thing as absolute truth. All things are relative.
- No connection with history or institutions. Their experience is that of alienation, loss, and despair.
- Championship of the individual and celebration of inner strength.
- Life is unordered.
- Concerned with the sub-conscious.

Themes of American Modernism:

1- Destruction:

During the First World War (1914), the world witnessed the chaos and destruction of which modern man was capable. The modernist American literature produced during the time reflects such themes of destruction and chaos. But chaos and destruction are embraced, as they signal a collapse of Western civilization's classical traditions. Literary modernists celebrated the collapse of conventional forms.

Modernist novels destroy conventions by reversing traditional norms, such as gender and racial roles, notable in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, for example. They also destroy conventional forms of language by deliberately breaking rules of syntax and structure. William Faulkner's novel *The Sound and the Fury*, for instance, boldly rejects the rules of language, as Faulkner invents new words and adopts a first-person narrative method, interior monologue.

Themes:

2- Fragmentation

Related to the theme of destruction is the theme of fragmentation. Fragmentation in modernist literature is thematic, as well as formal. Plot, characters, theme, images, and narrative form itself are broken. Take, for instance, T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, which depicts a modern waste land of crumbled cities. The poem itself is fragmented, consisting of broken stanzas and sentences that resemble the cultural debris and detritus through which the speaker (modern man) wades.

William Faulkner's novels, such as *The Sound and the Fury* are also fragmented in form, consisting of disjointed and nonlinear narratives. Modernist literature embraces fragmentation as a literary form, since it reinforces the fragmentation of reality and contradicts Hegelian notions of totality and wholeness.

3- Cycle:

Modernist literature is concerned with representing modernity, which, by its very definition, supersedes itself. Modernity must, in order to emerge, annihilate the past. Problematically, modernity must annihilate itself the very moment it is actualized, as the moment it emerges, it becomes a part of the past.

Modernist literature represents the paradox of modernity through themes of cycle and rejuvenation. Eliot's speaker in *The Waste Land* famously declares "these fragments I have shored against my ruins" (line 430). The speaker must reconstruct meaning by reassembling the pieces of history. Importantly, there is rebirth and rejuvenation in ruin, and modernist literature celebrates the endless cycle of destruction, as it ever gives rise to new forms and creations.

4- Loss and Exile:

Modernist literature is also marked by themes of loss and exile. Modernism rejects conventional truths and figures of authority, and modernists move away from religion. In modernist literature, man is assured that his own sense of morality trumps.

But individualism results in feelings of isolation and loss. Themes of loss, isolation and exile from society are particularly apparent in Ernest Hemingway's novels, the protagonists of which adopt rather nihilistic outlooks of the world because they have become so disenfranchised (deprived) from the human community.

5- Alienation:

- Sense of alienation in literature:

- The character belongs to a “lost generation” (Gertrude Stein)
- The character suffers from a “dissociation of sensibility”—separation of thought from feeling (T. S. Eliot)
- The character has “a Dream deferred” (Langston Hughes).

6- Valorization of the Individual:

- Characters are heroic in the face of a future they can't control.
- Demonstrates the uncertainty felt by individuals living in this era.
- Examples include Jay Gatsby in *The Great Gatsby*, Lt. Henry in *A Farewell to Arms*

Narrative Authority in Modernism:

Another element of modernist literature is the prevalent use of personal pronouns. Authority becomes a matter of perspective. There is no longer an anonymous, omniscient third-person narrator, as there is no universal truth, according to the modernists. In fact, many modernist novels (Faulkner's, for instance) feature multiple narrators, as many modernist poems *The Waste Land*, for instance) feature multiple speakers..

The conflicting perspectives of various narrators and speakers reflect the multiplicities of truth and the diversities of reality that modernism celebrates.

Literary Styles of Modernism:

1- Stream of consciousness narration: a narrative mode which seeks to portray an individual's point of view by giving the written equivalent of the character's thought processes, either through loose interior monologue or in connection to action.

2- Juxtaposition:

- Two images that are otherwise not commonly brought together appear side by side or structurally close together, thereby; forcing the reader to stop and reconsider the meaning of the text through the contrasting images, ideas, motifs, etc.

❑ For example, “He was slouched alertly” is a juxtaposition.

Value Differences in the Modern World:	
<u>Pre-Modern World</u> - Ordered - Meaningful - Optimistic - Stable - Faith - Morality/Values - Clear Sense of Identity	<u>Modern World (Early 20th Century)</u> - Chaotic - Futile - Pessimistic - Fluctuating - Loss of faith - Collapse of Morality/Values - Confused Sense of Identity and Place in the World

Characteristics of Modernism in American Literature:

- ❑ Emphasis on **bold experimentation** in style and form, reflecting the fragmentation of society.
- Example—There is no resolution in “A Worn Path”
- ❑ **Rejection of traditional themes** and subjects. **Loss of faith in religion and society.**
- ❑ Sense of disillusionment and **loss of faith in the American Dream**
- Example—Nick and Gatsby from *The Great Gatsby*

Lecture 7: Harlem Renaissance

Harlem Renaissance

The **Harlem Renaissance** was a [cultural movement](#) that spanned the 1920s. At the time, it was known as the "New Negro Movement", named after the 1925 anthology by [Alain Locke](#). Though it was centered in the [Harlem](#) neighborhood of [New York City](#), many French-speaking black writers from African and Caribbean colonies who lived in [Paris](#) were also influenced by the Harlem Renaissance.

The Harlem Renaissance is unofficially recognized to have spanned from about 1919 until the early or mid 1930s. Many of its ideas lived on much longer. The zenith of this "flowering of Negro literature", as [James Weldon Johnson](#) preferred to call the Harlem Renaissance, was placed between 1924 (the year that *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life* hosted a party for black writers where many white publishers were in attendance) and 1929 (the year of the [stock market](#) crash and the beginning of the [Great Depression](#)).

Important Features:

- 1. Harlem Renaissance (HR) is the name given to the period from the end of World War I and through the middle of the 1930s Depression, during which a group of talented African-American writers produced a sizable body of literature in the four prominent genres of poetry, fiction, drama, and essay.
- 2. The notion of "twoness", a divided awareness of one's identity, was introduced by W.E.B. Du Bois, one of the founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). and the author of the influential book *The Souls of Black Folks* (1903):
"One ever feels his two-ness - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled stirrings: two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder."
- 3- Common themes: alienation, marginality, the use of folk material, the use of the blues tradition, the problems of writing for an elite audience.
- 4. HR was more than just a literary movement: it included racial consciousness, "the back to Africa" movement led by Marcus Garvey, racial integration, the explosion of music particularly jazz, spirituals and blues, painting, dramatic revues, and others.

Novels of the Harlem Renaissance:

Fauset, Jessie Redmon: *There is Confusion*, 1924; *Plum Bun*, 1928; *The Chinaberry Tree*; 1931; *Comedy, American Style*, 1933

Hughes, Langston: *Not Without Laughter*, 1930

Larsen, Nella: *Quicksand*, 1928; *Passing*, 1929

McKay, Claude: *Home to Harlem*, 1927; *Banjo*, 1929; *Gingertown*, 1931; *Banana Bottom*, 1933

Schuyler, George: *Black No More*, 1930; *Slaves Today*, 1931

Thurman, Wallace: *The Blacker the Berry; a Novel of Negro Life*, 1929; *Infants of the Spring*, 1932; *Interne, with Abraham I. Furman*, 1932

Van Vechten, Carl: *Nigger Heaven*, 1926

History of the Movement:

The Harlem Renaissance, also known as the New Negro Movement, was a literary, artistic, cultural, intellectual movement that began in Harlem, New York after World War I and ended around 1935 during the Great Depression. The movement raised significant issues affecting the lives of African Americans through various forms of literature, art, music, drama, painting, sculpture, movies, and protests.

Voices of protest and ideological promotion of civil rights for African Americans inspired and created institutions and leaders who served as mentors to aspiring writers. Although the center of the Harlem Renaissance began in Harlem, New York, its influence spread throughout the nation and beyond and included philosophers, artists, writers, musicians, sculptors, movie makers and institutions that “attempted to assert...a dissociation of sensibility from that enforced by the American culture and its institutions.”

Harlem Renaissance Definition

An African-American cultural movement of the 1920s and 1930s, centered in [Harlem](#), that celebrated black traditions, the black voice, and black ways of life. Arna Bontemps, Langston [Hughes](#), Zora Neale [Hurstun](#), James Weldon [Johnson](#), Jean Toomer, and Dorothy West were some of the writers associated with the movement.

Definition:

a cultural movement in 1920s America during which black art, literature, and music experienced renewal and growth, originating in New York City's Harlem district; also called [Black Renaissance](#), [New Negro Movement](#)

Characteristics of Harlem Renaissance Poetry:

The Harlem Renaissance was a literary and cultural movement that began with the inception of the 20th Century. It is so called because it was first noticed in Harlem, a neighborhood of New York City. The movement was an African American cultural explosion expressed through essays, songs, theatrical pieces, novels and poetry. Harlem Renaissance poetry, as written by such literary luminaries as Langston Hughes and W.E.B. DuBois, was characterized by its themes, influences, focus and intent.

1- Intent:

Intent is a primary characteristic of all Harlem Renaissance literature, including poetry. The intent of this poetry was to improve and uplift African Americans through historical awareness and a popular culture that reflected self-awareness and self-worth in black Americans. All of this intent was expressed by the phrase "The New Negro," introduced by sociologist Alain LeRoy Locke in 1925. The term describes a new wave of African-American intellectuals who used poetry and other forms of artistic and cultural expression to subvert racial stereotypes and address the racial, economic, cultural and social impediments facing black Americans at the turn of the century.

2- Focus and Themes:

Harlem Renaissance poetry is characterized by a focus on the black American experience and relevant themes. Much of the poetry of the Harlem Renaissance is characterized as an examination of the historical place of the contemporary African American with regards to history and the future. This poetry asks the question: where has the black American been and where is he/she going?

Themes of migration---from Africa to the United States, from slavery and the south to industrial jobs in the urban north---were common. Poetry of the Renaissance also addressed themes of American identity and the American dream. In two famous poems, Langston Hughes wrote, "I, too, am America" and "What happens to a dream deferred?"

3- Musical Themes:

Much of the poetry of the Harlem Renaissance is characterized in both theme and content by the influence of traditionally "black" forms of music. The repetitive structure and recurring themes of blues music characterize the structure of many Renaissance poems. The interplay between jazz musicians and the call-and-response structure of slave songs also impacted the structure of Renaissance poetry. In its references to the black American past and experience of slavery, poetry of the era often alluded to African American spirituals. With regards to themes, much literature of the Harlem Renaissance included references the national popularity of blues and jazz.

Poetic Influences

Harlem Renaissance poetry took poetic influence from disparate forms of cultural expression. On page 287 of the book "The Harlem Renaissance," author Michael Feith asserts that poetry of the period was characterized by the influenced of African American folk poetry and oral traditions and contemporary American experimentation in modernist free verse.

Authors Cary D. Wintz and Paul Finkelman further declare on page 84 of their "Encyclopedia of the Harlem Renaissance, Volume 1" that Harlem Renaissance poetry from Chicago was characterized by the influence of an avant-garde style that arose in that city during the First World War. This style saw the ironic interpolation of elements of Negro spirituals into contemporary poetry.

Let America Be America Again

[Langston Hughes](#)

[Let America be America again](#)
[Let it be the dream it used to be](#)
[Let it be the pioneer on the plain](#)
[Seeking a home where he himself is free](#)
[\(America never was America to me.\)](#)
[Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed--](#)
[Let it be that great strong land of love](#)
[Where never kings connive nor tyrants scheme](#)
[That any man be crushed by one above](#)
[\(It never was America to me.\)](#)

In this classic poem Hughes dreams of the day when America can be what it was originally intended to be—a true democracy, with freedom, equality, and justice for all—while reminding us America has never fully lived up to this standard. Hughes deftly moves verse by verse, addressing the struggle for equal rights and his hope for a brighter future.

Lecture Eight: American Poetry: Examples

Because I Could Not Stop for Death A Poem by Emily Dickinson (1830-1886)

Because I could not stop for Death, He kindly stopped for me; The carriage held but just ourselves And Immortality. We slowly drove, he knew no haste, And I had put away My labour, and my leisure too, For his civility. We passed the school where children played, Their lessons scarcely done; We passed the fields of gazing grain, We passed the setting sun. Or rather, he passed us; The dews grew quivering and chill, For only gossamer my gown, My tippet only tulle.	We paused before a house that seemed A swelling of the ground; The roof was scarcely visible, The cornice but a mound. Since then 'tis centuries ; but each Feels shorter than the day I first surmised the horses' heads Were toward eternity.
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Type of Work

“Because I Could Not Stop for Death” is a [lyric](#) poem on the theme of death. The poem contains six stanzas, each with four lines. A four-line stanza is called a quatrain. The poem was first published in 1890 in *Poems, Series 1*, a collection of Miss Dickinson's poems.

Commentary and Theme

“Because I Could Not Stop for Death” reveals Emily Dickinson’s calm acceptance of death. It is surprising that she presents the experience as being no more frightening than receiving a gentleman caller—in this case, her fiancé (Death personified).

The journey to the grave begins in Stanza 1, when Death comes calling in a carriage in which Immortality is also a passenger. As the trip continues in Stanza 2, the carriage trundles along at an easy, unhurried pace, perhaps suggesting that death has arrived in the form of a disease or debility that takes its time to kill. Then, in Stanza 3, the author appears to review the stages of her life: childhood (the recess scene), maturity (the ripe, hence, “gazing” grain), and the descent into death (the setting sun)—as she passes to the other side. There, she experiences a chill because she is not warmly dressed. In fact, her garments are more appropriate for a wedding, representing a new beginning, than for a funeral, representing an end.

Her description of the grave as her “house” indicates how comfortable she feels about death. There, after centuries pass, so pleasant is her new life that time seems to stand still, feeling “shorter than a Day.”

The overall theme of the poem seems to be that death is not to be feared since it is a natural part of the endless cycle of nature. Her view of death may also reflect her personality and religious beliefs. On the one hand, as a spinster, she was somewhat reclusive and introspective, tending to dwell on loneliness and death. On the other hand, as a Christian and a Bible reader, she was optimistic about her ultimate fate and appeared to see death as a friend.

<p>Notes</p> <p>1...<u>gossamer my gown</u>: Thin wedding dress for the speaker's marriage to Death.</p> <p>2...<u>tippet</u>: Scarf for neck or shoulders.</p> <p>3...<u>tulle</u>: Netting.</p> <p>4...<u>house</u>: Speaker's tomb.</p> <p>5...<u>cornice</u>: Horizontal molding along the top of a wall.</p> <p>6...<u>Since . . . centuries</u>: The length of time she has been in the tomb.</p>	<p>Meter</p> <p>In each stanza, the first line has eight syllables (four feet); the second, six syllables (three feet); the third, eight syllables (four feet); and the fourth, six syllables (three feet). The meter alternates between iambic tetrameter (lines with eight syllables, or four feet) and iambic trimeter (lines with six syllables, or three feet). In iambic meter, the feet (pairs of syllables) contain an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable. The following example demonstrates the metric scheme.</p>
<p>Figures of Speech</p> <p>.....Following are examples of figures of speech in the poem.</p> <p><u>Alliteration</u></p> <p>Because I could not stop for Death (line 1) he knew no haste (line 5) My labor, and my leisure too (line 7) At recess, in the ring gazing grain (line 11) setting sun (line 12) For only gossamer my gown (line 15) My tippet only tulle (line 16) toward eternity (line 24)</p>	<p><u>Anaphora</u></p> <p>We passed the school, where children strove At recess, in the ring; We passed the fields of gazing grain, We passed the setting sun. (lines 9-12)</p> <p><u>Paradox</u></p> <p>Since then 'tis centuries, and yet each Feels shorter than the day I first surmised the horses' heads (lines 21-23)</p> <p><u>Personification</u></p> <p>We passed the setting sun. Or rather, he passed us (lines 12-13)</p> <p>Comparison of the sun to a person Death is personified throughout the poem</p>

Hope is the Thing with Feathers A Poem by Emily Dickinson (1830-1886)

<p>Hope is the thing with feathers That perches in the soul, And sings the tune without the words, And never stops at all,</p> <p>And sweetest in the gale is heard; And sore must be the storm That could abash the little bird That kept so many warm.</p> <p>I've heard it in the chilliest land And on the strangest sea; Yet, never, in extremity, It asked a crumb of me.</p>	<p>About the poem: In this poem, Emily Dickinson communicates that hope is like a bird because of its free and independent spirit. Hope is similar to a bird in its ability to bring comfort and consolation. Dickinson uses techniques such as extended metaphor and imagery to describe hope throughout her poem. The poem is introduced with, "Hope is the thing with feathers." Dickinson's use of the word "thing" denotes that hope is something abstract and vague. By identifying hope as a thing, Dickinson gives an intangible concept characteristics of a concrete object. The opening line of this poem also sets up the extended metaphor of comparing hope to a bird in the word "feathers." "Feathers represent hope, because feathers offer the image of flying away to a new hope and a new beginning."</p>
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Line two of Dickinson's poem further broadens the metaphor by giving hope delicate and sweet characteristics in the word "perches." Dickinson's choice of the word also suggests that, like a bird, hope is planning to stay. "Hope rests in our soul the way a bird rests on its perch." The next line continues with hope singing to our souls.

The line "And sings the tune—without the words," gives the reader a sense that hope is universal. Hope sings without words so that everyone may understand it, regardless of language barriers. The closing line of the first stanza, "And never stops at all," implies that hope is never ending. Hope cannot be stopped or destroyed. Dickinson's point is emphasized in the words "never" and "at all." In just one line, there are two negative words, which highlight Dickinson's message.

The second stanza depicts hope's continuous presence. "And sweetest in the gale is heard," is ironic because hope's most comforting song is heard during a "gale," a horrible windstorm.

One of the messages of the poem seems to say that whatever life throws at the individual there is always the dove-like glimmer of hope that sits in all of us that is so strong that its voice can still be heard in the "gale" of stormy times. Everyone goes through stormy times in their life and no matter where you are on earth or from which "strangest sea" you inhabit but there is no need to despair. Hope through the metaphor Dickinson uses, is a bird that "perches in the soul" of everyone, regardless of race, gender or status. It is something that everyone has to "keep them warm" against the storm of life, and it never stops singing nor does it ask "a crumb" of the user.

Hope is something that is present within us that we take for granted and usually think little of, until that is we come across poetry like this to capture our attention.

There is a definite contrast within the poem between hope on the one side as represented with the words like "warm," "Soul," "sweetest;" and in the pain of life as represented in words like "storm," "gales," "chillest." Although there is a clear battle between these two elements, it is clear which one comes out on top as the voice of hope can still be heard through the gales and storms. It is clear that whatever the battles we may face, hope wins through in the end.

Poetry of Harlem Renaissance	The Negro Speaks of Rivers by Langston Hughes
<p><i>"If We Must Die"</i> Claude McKay Limns If we must die, let it not be like hogs Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot, While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs, Making their mock at our accursed lot. If we must die, O let us nobly die So that our precious blood may not be shed In vain; then even the monsters we defy Shall be constrained to honor us though dead! O kinsmen! We must meet the common foe! Though far outnumbered let us show us brave, And for their thousand blows deal one death blow! What though before us lies the open grave? Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack, Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!</p>	<p>I've known rivers: I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins. My soul has grown deep like the rivers. I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young. I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep. I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it. I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset. I've known rivers: Ancient, dusky rivers. My soul has grown deep like the rivers.</p>
<p>Cross by Langston Hughes</p>	
<p>My old man's <u>a white</u> old man And my old mother's <u>black</u>. If ever I cursed my white old man I take my curses back. If ever I cursed my black old mother And wished she were in hell, next →</p>	<p>I'm sorry for that evil wish And now I wish her well My old man died in a fine big house. My ma died in a shack. I wonder were I'm going to die, Being neither white nor black?</p>

Literary Terms:

Alliteration is the repetition of initial sounds in neighboring words.

Example: sweet smell of success, a dime a dozen, bigger and better, jump for joy

Anaphora The deliberate repetition of a word or phrase at the beginning of several successive verses, clauses, or paragraphs.

One of the devices of repetition, in which the same phrase is repeated at the beginning of two or more lines.

Example: (see: Because I could not stop for Death)

Metaphor the comparison of two UNLIKE things.

Metaphor: Metaphor is a figure of speech where two distinctly different things are compared without using adverbs of comparison, 'as', 'like', etc.

Example: He is a horse. Thou art sunshine.

Meter

Meter refers to the varying, nevertheless recognizable pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables that occur in regular units in the lines of a verse. Each regular unit is called a *foot*. Depending upon the number of feet in a line, a line can be called *monometer* (if it has one foot), *dimeter* (if it has two feet), *trimeter*, *tetrameter* and so on till *nonameter* (if a line has nine meters in it).

Paradox reveals a kind of truth which at first seems contradictory. Two opposing ideas.

Example: Stone walls do not a prison make, Nor iron bars a cage.

Personification is giving human qualities to animals or objects. Making inanimates as animates.

Example: a smiling moon, a jovial sun

Rhyme: When two similar sounding words are repeated in a stanza of a poem, it is known as a rhyme. Rhymes that appear on the end of the lines are called end rhyme which is the most common type of rhyme in poetry. There is also internal rhyme where rhyming words appear in the same line. Apart from this, rhymes can also be divided into masculine rhymes and feminine rhymes. Rhyming words that end with a stressed syllable is called the masculine rhyme, while those that end with an unstressed syllable are known as feminine rhyme.

Example: Roses are red

Violents are blue

Sugar is sweet

And so are you.

Simile is the comparison of two unlike things using *like* or *as*

Example: He eats like a horse.

Stanza is a unified group of lines in poetry.

Theme is the general idea or insight about life that a writer wishes to express. All of the elements of [literary terms](#) contribute to theme. A simple theme can often be stated in a single sentence.

Example: "After reading (this book, poem, essay), I think the author wants me to understand....."