

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	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.
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

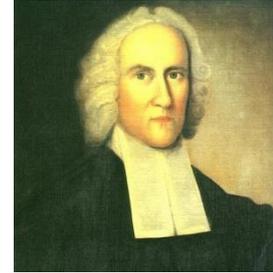
- William Bradford Of Plymouth Plantation (HISTORICAL NARRATIVE)



- 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"

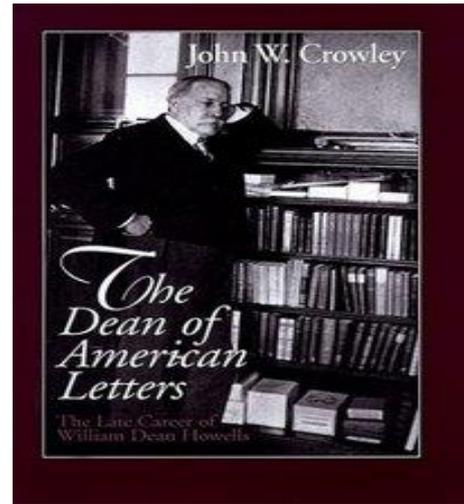
sociology and psychology

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....."

Lecture 9: American Fiction: Short Story

"The Story of an Hour"

By Kate Chopin (1851-1904)

Type of Work:

"The Story of an Hour" is a short story centering on a young married woman of the late nineteenth century as she reacts to a report that her husband has died in a train accident.

Publication:

"The Story of an Hour" was first published in December 6, 1894, under the title "The Dream of an Hour."

Setting:

The action takes place in a single hour in an American home in the last decade of the nineteenth Century.

Observance of the Unities:

The story observes the classical unities of time, place, and action. These unities dictate that the events in a short story should take place (1) in a single day and (2) in a single location as part of (3) a single story line with no subplots.

French classical writers, interpreting guidelines established by Aristotle for stage dramas, formulated the unities. Over the centuries, many writers began to ignore them, but many playwrights and authors of short stories continued to use them.

Author:

Kate Chopin (1851-1904) is best known for her short stories (more than 100) and a novel, *The Awakening*. One of her recurring themes—the problems facing women in a society that repressed them—made her literary works highly popular in the late twentieth century. They remain popular today.

Characters and Plot Summary

- 1- **Mrs. Louise Mallard:** Young, attractive woman who mourns the reported death of her husband but exults in the freedom she will enjoy in the years to come.
- 2- **Brently Mallard:** Mrs. Mallard's husband.
- 3- **Josephine:** Mrs. Mallard's sister.
- 4- **Richards:** Friend of Brently Mallard.
- 5- **Doctors:** Physicians who arrive too late to save Mrs. Mallard.

Brently Mallard has died in a train accident, according to a report received at a newspaper office. Mr. Richards, a friend of Mallard, was in the newspaper office when the report came in. He tells Mallard's sister-in-law, Josephine, of Mallard's death, and accompanies Josephine to the Mallard home. Because Mallard's wife, Louise—a young, attractive woman—suffers from a heart condition, Josephine announces news of the tragedy as gently as possible.

Mrs. Mallard breaks down, crying fitfully, then goes upstairs to a room to be alone. There she sits down and gazes out a window, sobbing. It is spring. Birds sing, and the trees burst with new life. It had been raining, but now patches of blue sky appear.

Suddenly, an extraordinary thought occurs to Mrs. Mallard, interrupting her grieving: She is free. She is now an independent woman—at liberty to do as she pleases. Because Mrs. Mallard seems to feel guilty at this thought, she tries to fight it back at first. Then she succumbs to it, allowing it to sweep over her. She whispers, "Free, free, free!"

Plot Summary:

To be sure, she will cry at the funeral. However, in the years to come, she will know nothing but joy and happiness, for there will be "no powerful will bending her" to do its bidding. Of course, she had loved her husband. Well, sometimes. On other occasions, she had not loved him at all. But what does it matter now, she thinks, whether or how much she had loved her husband? The important thing is that she is free.

Worried about her sister, Josephine pounds on Mrs. Mallard's door, begging entry. But Louise, saying she is all right, tells her to go away. Mrs. Mallard then resumes her revelry about the wondrous future before her—all the days that will belong to her alone. Only yesterday she wished that life would be short; now she wishes that life will be long.

At length, she answers the door and goes downstairs with Josephine. At the bottom of the stairs, Mr. Richards stands waiting while someone is opening the front door. It is Brently Mallard. There had been a mix-up. He was not in the accident, or even near it, when it occurred. Josephine shrieks. Richards quickly moves in front of Brently to prevent Mrs. Mallard from seeing him. But it is too late.

Physicians later determine that Mrs. Mallard's death resulted from "joy that kills." Her weak heart could not withstand the happy shock of seeing her husband alive and whole.

Themes:

1- Oppression:

Society in late nineteenth century expected women to keep house, cook, bear and rear children—but little more. Despite efforts of women's-rights activists such as Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Susan B. Anthony, women still had not received the right to vote in national elections by the century's end. Moreover, employers generally discriminated against women by hiring them for menial jobs only and paying them less than men for the same work. *The Story of an Hour* hints that Mrs. Mallard's husband—perhaps a typical husband of his day—dominated his wife.

2- Repression:

Louise Mallard appears to have been a weak-willed woman, one who probably repressed her desire to control her destiny. Consequently, during her marriage, she suffered constant stress that may well have caused or contributed to her "heart trouble," referred to in the first sentence of the story.

Symbolism and Figures of Speech

Symbolism

Examples of [symbols](#) in the story are the following:

Springtime (Paragraph 5): The new, exciting life that Mrs. Mallard thinks is awaiting her.

Patches of Blue Sky (Paragraph 6): Emergence of her new life.

Figures of Speech

Examples of [figures of speech](#) are the following:

Revealed in half-concealing (Paragraph 2): [Paradox](#)

Storm of grief (Paragraph 3): [Metaphor](#)

Physical exhaustion that haunted her body (Paragraph 4): [Metaphor/Personification](#)

Breath of rain (Paragraph 5): [Metaphor](#)

Song which someone was singing (Paragraph 5): [Alliteration](#)

Clouds that had met (Paragraph 6): [Metaphor/Personification](#)

The sounds, the scents (Paragraph 9): [Alliteration](#)

Thing that was approaching to possess her (Paragraph 10): [Metaphor/Personification](#)

Monstrous joy (Paragraph 12): [Oxymoron](#)

She carried herself unwittingly like a goddess of Victory (Paragraph 20): [Simile](#)

Joy that kills (Paragraph 23): [Paradox](#). The phrase is also ironic, since the doctors mistakenly believe that Mrs. Mallard was happy to see her husband

What's in a Name?

Not until Paragraph 16 does the reader learn the protagonist's first name, Louise. Why the author delayed revealing her given name is open to speculation. I believe the author did so to suggest that the young woman lacked individuality and identity until her husband's reported death liberated her. Before that time, she was merely Mrs. Brently Mallard, an appendage grafted onto her husband's identity. While undergoing her personal renaissance alone in her room, she regains her own identity. It is at this time that her sister, Josephine, calls out, "Louise, open the door!" However, there is irony in Mrs. Mallard's first name: *Louise* is the feminine form of the masculine *Louis*. So even when Mrs. Mallard takes back her identity, it is in part a male identity. (Michael J. Cummings, *Cummings Study Guides*)

Foreshadowing

The opening sentence of the story foreshadows the ending—or at least hints that Mrs. Mallard's heart condition will affect the outcome of the story. Moreover, this sentence also makes the ending believable. Without an early reference to her heart ailment, the ending would seem implausible and contrived.

Study Questions and Essay Topics:

- 1- What was life like for Mrs. Mallard in the home of Brently Mallard?
- 2- In the report of the train accident, Brently Mallard's name was at the top of the list of fatalities (Paragraph 2). Does this information mean that Mallard was an important citizen in his community? Does it also suggest that perhaps Louise married him, in part, because of his standing in the community?
- 3- Do you believe Brently Mallard mistreated his wife? In answering this question, keep in mind the following: (1) In Paragraph 13, Louise Mallard recalls that Brently was kind and that "he had never looked save with love upon her." (2) However, Paragraph 8 had previously informed the reader that Mrs. Mallard's face "bespoke repression," and Paragraph 14 says Brently had a "powerful will bending her."
- 4- How much of Mrs. Mallard's apparent unhappiness in her marriage was her own fault?
- 5- After Mrs. Mallard receives news that her husband died in a train accident, she goes to "her room." Do these two words mean that she slept separately from her husband? Does the fact that no children are named in the story indeed indicate that she and her husband slept apart

Literary Terms:

Character: The embodiment of a person in a drama or narrative through verbal representation or actions. It is through their dialogs and actions that the readers or audience is able to understand the moral, intellectual and emotional qualities of that character and thus the overall story.

Foreshadowing is the use of hints or clues to suggest what will happen later in literature.

Foreshadowing is a tool used to give the reader or audience a hint of what may happen ahead.

Oxymoron: A literary device in which two words that contradict each other in meaning are used together to form a paradox.

Oxymoron is putting two contradictory words together.

Examples:

hot ice, cold fire, wise fool, sad joy,

Plot: The effect of the structure and relationship of the actions, events and characters in a fictional work.

Literary Terms:

Point of View: It is a narrative method which determines the manner in which and the position from where, a story is told.

Point of view is the perspective from which a story is told. We may choose to tell our story in:

[first person](#), using "I" or "we";

[third person](#) ("he," "she," "it"), which can be [limited](#) or [omniscient](#); or

second person, "you," the least common point of view.

[First person](#): limits the reader to one character's perspective.

[Third Person Point of View](#):

Though first person can be powerful, [third person](#) is actually the more versatile point of view. Third person allows you to create a much richer, more complicated universe.

Setting is determining Time and Place in fiction.

Setting: Setting refers to the time, place and social circumstances in which a literary work occurs.

Lecture 10: American Fiction: Short Story

The Tell-Tale Heart

By Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849)

Plot Summary

.....The narrator has been so nervous that he jumps at the slightest sound. He can hear all things on heaven and earth, he says, and some things in hell. But he maintains that he is not mad. To prove his sanity, he says, he will calmly tell the reader his story.

.....One day, he decided to take the life of an old man for no other reason except that he had an eye resembling that of a vulture—"a pale blue eye with a film over it." Over time, it became so unbearable to look upon it that the narrator had no other choice but to get rid of the old man. The way he went about the task, with such calculation and cunning, demonstrates that he is not mad, the narrator says.

.....At midnight, he would turn the knob on the door of the old man's bedroom. Then he would open the door ever so slowly. In fact, it would take him an hour to open the door wide enough to poke his head into the room. Would a madman have been so cautious? Then he would open a little slot on his lantern, releasing light, to check the hideous eye. For seven straight nights, it was closed, "and so it was impossible to do the work," he says, "for it was not the old man who vexed me but his Evil Eye."

.....On the eighth night, the narrator opened the door with greater caution than before. As before, the room was completely dark. He was about to shine the lantern when the old man sat up and said, "Who's there?" The narrator did not answer but remained in place, not moving a muscle, for an entire hour. All the while, the old man continued to sit up, wondering—the narrator speculated—what he had heard. The wind? A mouse? A cricket?

Although he did not hear the old man lie down again, the narrow open the lantern slot just a sliver, then wider. The beam fell upon the open vulture eye. Then the narrator heard a low, muffled sound—the beating of the man's heart! Or so he believed. The heartbeat louder—then louder and louder. Would a neighbor hear it?

.....Shouting, the narrator rushed into the room. After the old man shrieked, the narrator quickly threw him to the floor and pulled the bed on top of him. The heart continued to beat, but only softly. Moments later, the beating stopped. The narrator checked his pulse. Nothing. The old man was dead. After moving the bed aside, the narrator took up three floorboards, secured the old man between the joists, and replaced the boards. The narrator felt proud of himself, for there was no blood to wash out, no other task of any kind to do.

.....At 4 a.m., just when he had finished his work, the narrator answered a knock at his front door. When he opened it, three policemen entered, saying a neighbor had reported hearing a shriek, possibly indicating foul play. They needed to search the premises. "I smiled," the narrator says, "for what had I to fear?"

.....After welcoming the police, he told them the shriek was his own; he had cried out during a dream. He also told them that the old man who lived in the house was away in the country. Next, he took the police all over the house, inviting them to search everything—thoroughly. After they entered the old man's chamber, the narrator pointed out that the old man's possessions had not been disturbed.

In his swelling self-confidence, the narrator brought in chairs and invited the policemen to rest. "I myself, in the wild audacity of my perfect triumph, placed my own seat upon the very spot beneath which reposed the corpse of the victim," the narrator says.

.....The police appeared completely satisfied that nothing criminal had occurred in the house. However, they continued to chat idly, staying much longer than the narrator had expected. By and by, he began to hear a rhythmic ringing in his head. While he was talking with the police, the noise—which had the cadence of a ticking watch but a much louder sound—persisted, becoming more distinct. A moment later, he concluded that the rhythmic ringing was outside of him. Still, he talked on, now more loudly. The policemen did not seem to hear the noise.

.....When it grew even louder, the narrator rose and began arguing with the officers about trivial matters, punctuating his conversation with wild hand movements. He also paced back and forth. Then he raved and cursed and dragged his chair over the floorboards, all in an apparent attempt to drown out the noise he was hearing. Meanwhile, it grew still louder, and louder, and louder. How was it possible that they could not hear it?

.....In fact, they must have heard it, the narrator decided. And they must have suspected him of a crime all along. Their calm manner and idle chatter were part of a ruse to mock him. Unable to tolerate their counterfeit behavior any longer, unable to endure the sound any longer, the narrator brought the whole business to a crashing climax.

....."Villains! I shrieked, "dissemble no more! I admit the deed! – tear up the planks! – here, here! – it is the beating of his hideous heart!"

Setting

The story opens in an undisclosed locale, possibly a prison, when the narrator tells readers that he is not mad. To defend his sanity, he tells a story which he believes will prove him sound of mind. His story is set in a house occupied by the narrator and an old man. The time of the events in the story is probably the early 1840's, when Poe wrote the story. The action in the narrator's story takes place over eight days.

Characters

The Narrator: Deranged unnamed person who tries to convince the reader that he is sane. The narrator's gender is not identified, but Poe probably intended him to be a man. Here is why: Poe generally wrote from a male perspective, often infusing part of himself into his main characters. Also, in major short stories in which he identifies the narrator by gender—stories such as "The Black Cat," "The Cask of Amontillado," and "The Fall of the House of Usher"—the narrator is male. Finally, the narrator of "A Tell-Tale Heart" exhibits male characteristics, including (1) A more pronounced tendency than females to commit violent acts. Statistics demonstrate overwhelmingly that murder is a male crime. (2) Physical strength that would be unusual in a female. The narrator drags the old man onto the floor and pulls the bed on top of him, then tears up floorboards and deposits the body between joists. (3) The narrator performs a man's chore by bringing four chairs into the old man's bedroom, one for the narrator and three for the policemen. If the narrator were a woman, the policemen probably would have fetched the chairs. But they did not.

The Old Man: Seemingly harmless elder who has a hideous "evil eye" that unnerves the narrator.

Neighbor: Person who hears a shriek coming from the house of the narrator and the old man, then reports it to the police.

Three Policemen: Officers who search the narrator's house after a neighbor reports hearing a shriek.

Type of Work

Short story in the horror genre that focuses on the psyche of the narrator .

Year of Publication

"The Tell-Tale Heart" was first published in the winter of 1843 in *The Pioneer*, a Boston magazine.

Themes

Theme 1: A human being has a perverse, wicked side—another self—that can goad him into doing evil things that have no apparent motive. This is the same theme of another Poe story, "The Black Cat." The narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart" admits in the second paragraph of the story that he committed a senseless crime, saying: "Object there was none. Passion there was none. I loved the old man. He had never wronged me. He had never given me insult. For his gold I had no desire." However, he does note that his evil deed, murder, was not entirely unprovoked; for the old man he killed had a hideous eye that unnerved him. Unable to look upon it any longer, he decided to kill the old man.

Theme 2: Fear of discovery can bring about discovery. At the end of the story, the narrator begins to crack under the pressure of a police investigation, hearing the sound of the murdered man's beating heart, and tells the police where he hid the body. Fear of discovery is the principle under which lie detectors work.

Theme 3: The evil within is worse than the evil without. The old man has a hideous, repulsive eye; outwardly, he is ugly. But, as the narrator admits, he is otherwise a harmless, well-meaning person. The narrator, on the other hand, is inwardly ugly and repulsive, for he plans and executes murder; his soul is more repulsive than the old man's eye.

Point of View

The story is told in the first-person point of view by an unreliable narrator. The narrator is obviously deranged, readers learn during his telling of his tale, even though he declares at the outset that he is sane. As in many of his other short stories, Poe does not name the narrator. A possible explanation for this is that the unnamed narrator becomes every human being, thereby enhancing the universality of the short story. In other words, the narrator represents anyone who has ever acted perversely or impulsively—and then had to pay for his deed.

Prose Beats Like a Heart

From time to time, Poe uses a succession of short sentences or word groups, creating a rhythm not unlike that of a heartbeat. Note the following examples from the story:

Object there was none. Passion there was none. I loved the old man. He had never wronged me. He had never given me insult. For his gold I had no desire. I think it was his eye! Yes, it was this!

I scarcely breathed. I held the lantern motionless. I tried how steadily I could to maintain the ray upon the eye. Meantime the hellish tattoo of the heart increased.

Was it possible they heard not? Almighty God! – no, no? They heard! – they suspected! – they KNEW! – they were making a mockery of my horror! – this I thought, and this I think. But anything was better than this agony! Anything was more tolerable than this derision! I could bear those hypocritical smiles no longer! I felt that I must scream or die! – and now – again – hark! louder! louder! louder! LOUDER! – "Villains!" I shrieked, "dissemble no more! I admit the deed! – tear up the planks! – here, here! – it is the beating of his hideous heart!"

Figures of Speech

As in other works of his, Poe uses many figures of speech. Examples are the following:

Anaphora

Anaphora is a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is repeated at the beginning of a clause or another group of words. Anaphora imparts emphasis and balance. Here are boldfaced examples from "The Tell-Tale Heart":

I heard all things in the heaven and in the earth. **I heard** many things in hell.

With what caution—**with** what foresight, **with** what dissimulation, I went to work!

He had been trying to fancy them causeless, but could not. **He had been** saying to himself, "**It is** nothing but the wind in the chimney, **it is** only a mouse crossing the floor," or, "**It is** merely a cricket which has made a single chirp."

There was nothing to wash out—**no** stain of any kind—**no** blood-spot whatever.

They heard!—**they** suspected!—**they** KNEW!—**they** were making a mockery of my horror!

Personification

Death in approaching him had stalked with his black shadow before him and enveloped the victim. [Here, Death is a person.]

Simile

So I opened it—you cannot imagine how stealthily, stealthily—until at length a single dim ray like the thread of the spider shot out from the crevice and fell upon the vulture eye. [The simile is the comparison of the ray to the thread of the spider with the use of the word *like*. It increased my fury as the beating of a drum stimulates the soldier into courage. [The simile is the comparison of the heartbeat to a drumbeat.]

His room was as black as pitch with the thick darkness. . . . [The simile is the comparison of the darkness to pitch.]

Alliteration

Hearken! and observe **how** healthily, **how** calmly, I can tell you the **whole** story.

Meanwhile, the **hellish** **tattoo** of the **heart** increased.

It is the beating of **his** **hideous** **heart**!

Irony

I was never kinder to the old man than during the whole week before I killed him.

Lecture 11: American Fiction: Novel

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

By Mark Twain (1835-1910)

Type of Work

.....*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is a novel that does not fit neatly into a single genre. However, it does contain elements of the apprenticeship novel, or bildungsroman, because it presents the experiences of a boy as he learns important values and lessons about life. It also contains elements of the picaresque novel, a type of fiction that presents the episodic adventures (each a story in itself) of a person as he travels from place to place and meets a variety of other characters, some of them are also travelers.

Composition and Publication Dates

.....Mark Twain wrote *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* between 1876 and 1883.

Setting

.....The action takes place in St. Petersburg, Missouri, and at various locations along the banks of the Mississippi River in Missouri, Arkansas, and Illinois. The time is the middle of the 19th Century, before the Civil War.

Main Characters:

Protagonist: Huckleberry Finn

Antagonist: Society and Its Rules and Laws

Huckleberry Finn: Loyal, cheerful, fair-minded Missouri boy. Because his father abuses him, he runs away and teams with an escaped slave during many adventures on a raft ride on the Mississippi River. Huck is the narrator of the novel.

Jim: The escaped slave who joins Huck. He is a simple, loyal, and trusting man whose common sense helps guide Huck. In a way, he serves as a surrogate father for Huck.

Pap Finn: Huck's drunken, greedy, abusive father, who is nearing age fifty. His racism is symptomatic of the racism that infected society as a whole in the nineteenth-century America.

Widow Douglas: Kindly but straitlaced woman who takes Huck into her home.

Miss Watson: The widow's sister and owner of Jim.

Tom Sawyer: Huck's friend. He likes to stage mock adventures of the kind he reads about in books.

Joe Harper, Ben Rogers, Tommy Barnes: Members of Tom Sawyer's gang.

Aunt Polly: Tom Sawyer's aunt.

Judge Thatcher: Judge who looks out for Huck's welfare.

Rev. Mr. Hobson, Attorney Levi Bell, Deacon Lot Hovey, Ben Rucker, Widow Bartley: Other Friends of the Wilks sisters.

Slave Servants of the Wilks

Sally Phelps (Aunt Sally): Tom Sawyer's aunt.

Silas Phelps: Sally's husband.

Old Doctor: Physician who treats Tom's leg wound.

Point of View

.....Huckleberry Finn tells the story in the first-person point of view. His narration, including his accounts of conversations, contains regionalisms, grammatical errors, pronunciation errors, and other characteristics of the speech or writing of a nineteenth-century Missouri boy with limited education. The use of patois bolsters the verisimilitude of the novel.

Summary : Chapter One

. . . when I couldn't stand it no longer I lit out. I got into my old rags and my sugar-hogshead again, and was free and satisfied.

The novel begins as the narrator (later identified as Huckleberry Finn) states that we may know of him from another book, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, written by "Mr. Mark Twain." Huck quickly asserts that it "ain't no matter" if we haven't heard of him. According to Huck, Twain mostly told the truth in the previous tale, with some "stretchers" thrown in, although everyone—except Tom's Aunt Polly, the Widow Douglas, and maybe a few other girls—tells lies once in a while.

We learn that *Tom Sawyer* ended with Tom and Huckleberry finding a stash of gold some robbers had hidden in a cave. The boys received \$6,000 apiece, which the local judge, Judge Thatcher, put into a trust. The money in the bank now accrues a dollar a day from interest. Then, the Widow Douglas adopted and tried to "sivilize" Huck. Huck couldn't stand it, so he threw on his old rags and ran away. He has since returned because Tom Sawyer told him he could join his new band of robbers if he would return to the Widow "and be respectable."

The Widow frequently bemoans her failure to reform Huck. He particularly cringes at the fact that he has to "grumble" (i.e., pray) over the food before every meal. The Widow tries to teach Huck about Moses, but Huck loses interest when he realizes that Moses is dead. The Widow will not let Huck smoke but approves of snuff since she uses it herself. Her sister, Miss Watson, tries to give Huck spelling lessons. These efforts are not in vain, as Huck does in fact learn to read.

Huck feels especially restless because the Widow and Miss Watson constantly attempt to improve his behavior. When Miss Watson tells him about the "bad place"—hell—he blurts out that he would like to go there, for a change of scenery. This proclamation causes an uproar. Huck doesn't see the point of going to the "good place" and resolves not to bother trying to get there. He keeps this sentiment a secret, however, because he doesn't want to cause more trouble. When Huck asks, Miss Watson tells him that there is no chance that Tom Sawyer will end up in heaven. Huck is glad "because I wanted him and me to be together."

One night, after Miss Watson leads a prayer session with Huck and the household slaves, Huck goes to bed feeling “so lonesome I most wished I was dead.” He gets shivers hearing the sounds of nature through his window. Huck accidentally flicks a spider into a candle, and the bad omen frightens him. Just after midnight, Huck hears movement below the window and hears a “me-yow” sound, to which he responds with another “me-yow.” Climbing out the window onto the shed, Huck finds Tom Sawyer waiting for him in the yard.

Summary: Chapter 2

Huck and Tom tiptoe through the Widow’s garden. Huck trips on a root as he passes by the kitchen, and Jim, one of Miss Watson’s slaves, hears him from inside. Tom and Huck crouch down and try to stay still, but Huck is struck by a series of uncontrollable itches, as often happens when he is in a situation “where it won’t do for you to scratch.” Jim says aloud that he will stay awake until he discovers the source of the sound, but after several minutes, he falls asleep. Tom wants to tie Jim up, but the more practical Huck objects, so Tom settles for simply playing a trick by putting Jim’s hat on a tree branch over Jim’s head. Tom also takes candles from the kitchen, despite Huck’s objections that they will risk getting caught.

Huck tells us that afterward, Jim tells everyone that some witches flew him around and put the hat atop his head. Jim expands the tale further, becoming a local celebrity among the slaves, who enjoy witch stories. Around his neck, Jim wears the five-cent piece Tom left for the candles, calling it a charm from the devil with the power to cure sickness. Huck notes somewhat sarcastically that Jim nearly becomes so “stuck up” from his newfound celebrity that he is unfit to be a servant.

Meanwhile, Tom and Huck meet up with a few other boys and take a boat to a large cave. There, Tom names his new band of robbers “Tom Sawyer’s Gang.” All must sign an oath in blood, vowing, among other things, to kill the family of any member who reveals the gang’s secrets. The boys think it “a real beautiful oath,” and Tom admits that he got part of it from books that he has read. The boys nearly disqualify Huck because he has no family aside from a drunken father who can never be found, but Huck appeases the boys by offering Miss Watson. Tom says the gang must capture and ransom people, although none of the boys knows what “ransom” means. Tom assumes it means to keep them captive until they die. In response to one boy’s question, Tom tells the group that women are not to be killed but should be kept at the hideout, where the boys’ manners will charm the women into falling in love with the boys. When one boy begins to cry out of homesickness and threatens to tell the group’s secrets, Tom bribes him with five cents. They agree to meet again someday, but not on a Sunday, because that would be blasphemous. Huck makes it home and gets into bed just before dawn.

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Summary: Chapter 43 (LXIII)

But I reckon I got to light out for the territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she’s going to adopt me and sivilize me, and I can’t stand it. I been there before.

When Huck asks Tom what he had planned to do once he had freed the already-freed Jim, Tom replies that he was planning to repay Jim for his troubles and send him back a hero, giving him a reception complete with a marching band. When Aunt Polly and the Phelps hear about the assistance Jim gave the doctor in nursing Tom, they immediately unchain him, feed him, and treat him like a king. Tom gives Jim forty dollars for his troubles, and Jim declares that the omen of his hairy chest—which was supposed to bring him fortune—has come true.

Tom makes a full recovery and wears the bullet from his leg on a watch-guard around his neck. He and Huck would like to go on another adventure, to “Indian Territory” (present-day Oklahoma). Huck thinks it quite possible that Pap has taken all his money by now, but Jim says that could not have happened. Jim tells Huck that the dead body they found on the floating house during the flood was Pap. Huck now has nothing more to write about and is “rotten glad” about that, because writing a book turned out to be quite a task. He does not plan any future writings. Instead, he plans to head out west immediately because Aunt Sally is already trying to “sivilize” him. Huck has had quite enough of that.

Lecture 12: Novel: *Huckleberry Finn*

Huckleberry Finn

Twain began work on *Huckleberry Finn*, a sequel to *Tom Sawyer*, in an effort to capitalize on the popularity of the earlier novel. This new novel took on a more serious character, however, as Twain focused increasingly on the institution of slavery and the South. Twain soon set *Huckleberry Finn* aside, perhaps because its darker tone did not fit the optimistic sentiments of the Gilded Age. In the early 1880s, however, the hopefulness of the post-Civil War years began to fade. Reconstruction, the political program designed to reintegrate the defeated South into the Union as a slavery-free region, began to fail. The harsh measures the victorious North imposed only embittered the South. Concerned about maintaining power, many Southern politicians began an effort to control and oppress the black men and women whom the war had freed.

Ultimately, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has proved significant not only as a novel that explores the racial and moral world of its time but also, through the controversies that continue to surround it, as an artifact of those same moral and racial tensions as they have evolved to the present day.

Character Analysis Huckleberry:

From the beginning of the novel, Twain makes it clear that Huck is a boy who comes from the lowest levels of white society. His father is a drunk and a ruffian who disappears for months on end. Huck himself is dirty and frequently homeless. Although the Widow Douglas attempts to “reform” Huck, he resists her attempts and maintains his independent ways. The community has failed to protect him from his father, and though the Widow finally gives Huck some of the schooling and religious training that he had missed, he has not been indoctrinated with social values in the same way a middle-class boy like [Tom Sawyer](#) has been. Huck’s distance from mainstream society makes him skeptical of the world around him and the ideas it passes on to him.

Huck’s instinctual distrust and his experiences as he travels down the river force him to question the things society has taught him. According to the law, [Jim](#) is Miss Watson’s property, but according to Huck’s sense of logic and fairness, it seems “right” to help Jim. Huck’s natural intelligence and his willingness to think through a situation on its own merits lead him to some conclusions that are correct in their context but that would shock white society. For example, Huck discovers, when he and Jim meet a group of slave-hunters, that telling a lie is sometimes the right course of action.

Tom Sawyer:

Tom is the same age as Huck and his best friend. Whereas Huck’s birth and upbringing have left him in poverty and on the margins of society, Tom has been raised in relative comfort. As a result, his beliefs are an unfortunate combination of what he has learned from the adults around him and the fanciful notions he has gleaned from reading romance and adventure novels. Tom believes in sticking strictly to “rules,” most of which have more to do with style than with morality or anyone’s welfare. Tom is thus the perfect foil for Huck: his rigid adherence to rules and precepts contrasts with Huck’s tendency to question authority and think for himself.

Although Tom’s escapades are often funny, they also show just how disturbingly and unthinkingly cruel society can be. Tom knows all along that Miss Watson has died and that [Jim](#) is now a free man, yet he is willing to allow Jim to remain a captive while he entertains himself with fantastic escape plans. Tom’s plotting tortures not only Jim, but Aunt Sally and Uncle Silas as well. In the end, although he is just a boy like Huck and is appealing in his zest for adventure and his unconscious wittiness, Tom embodies what a young, well-to-do white man is raised to become in the society of his time: self-centered with dominion over all.

Important Quote Explained:

The Widow Douglas she took me for her son, and allowed she would sivilize me; but it was rough living in the house all the time, considering how dismal regular and decent the widow was in all her ways; and so when I couldn't stand it no longer I lit out. I got into my old rags and my sugar-hogshead again, and was free and satisfied. But Tom Sawyer he hunted me up and said he was going to start a band of robbers, and I might join if I would go back to the widow and be respectable. So I went back.

In these lines, which appear on the first page of the novel, Huck discusses events that have occurred since the end of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, the novel in which he made his first appearance. Here, Huck establishes his opposition to “sivilizing,” which seems natural for a thirteen-year-old boy rebelling against his parents and other authorities. Our initial inclination may be to laugh and dismiss Huck’s urges for freedom. At the same time, however, we see that Huck’s problems with civilized society are based on some rather mature observations about the worth of that society. Huck goes on to associate civilization and respectability with a childish game—Tom’s band of robbers, in which the participants are to pretend to be criminals. Under the influence of his friend, Huck gives in and returns to the Widow’s, but as the novel progresses, his dislike for society reappears and influences the important decisions he makes.

“But I reckon I got to light out for the territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she’s going to adopt me and sivilize me, and I can’t stand it. I been there before.”

These lines are the last in the novel. By the final chapter, most everything has been resolved: Jim is free, Tom is on his way to recovering from a bullet wound, and Aunt Sally has offered to adopt Huck. Although Huck has come to like Sally and Silas, he knows they are still a part of the society he has come to distrust and fear. Aunt Sally’s intentions for Huck center around the upbringing that society thinks every boy should have: religion, clean clothes, education, and an indoctrination in right and wrong. Huck, however, has come to realize that the first two are useless and that, in reference to the third, he can provide a much better version for himself than can society. The “territories,” the relatively unsettled western United States, will offer Huck an opportunity to be himself, in a world not yet “sivilized” and thus brimming with promise. Weary of his old life, Huck contemplates ways to continue living with the same freedom he felt on the raft. Huck’s break from society is complete, and before the dust from his adventures is fully settled, he is already scheming to detach himself again.

Themes

Freedom

All human beings are free, independent, and equal members of society. The novel celebrates the spirit of freedom and independence through Huck and Jim, escapees from oppression.

The Primacy of the Moral Law

The moral law supersedes government law. By protecting the black slave Jim, Huck breaks man-made law and feels guilty. But he refuses to turn Jim in because his moral instincts tell him he is doing the right thing.

Intuitive Wisdom

Wisdom comes from the heart, not the head. The educated characters in the novel are often deeply flawed in some way—self-righteous, prejudiced, quixotic, bound to tradition.

However, the uneducated—namely, Huck and Jim—exhibit a natural, intuitive understanding of the world. Though ignorant in many ways, they are wise in the ways that count, relying on conscience, common sense, and compassion to guide them.

A Child Shall Lead

A little child shall lead them. Huck is portrayed as a boy who had a better grasp of morality than the often corrupt civilization around him—a boy worth imitating for his virtues.

Love of Money

The love of money is the root of all evil. It is the love of money, Huck's, that prompts Pap Finn to gain custody of Huck. It is the love of money that motivates the Duke and the King to work their scams. And, most important of all, it is the love of money that makes southerners retain the institution of slavery.

Climax

.....The climax occurs when Tom and Huck free Jim, and Tom—who has suffered a bullet wound in the leg—tells Huck that a provision in Miss Watson's will has freed Jim.

Structure and Style

.....Like the Mississippi River itself, the plot flows around bends, through darkness and fog, and into bright sunlight. The story is full of surprises, moving through many episodes that are little stories in themselves. These episodes form a unified whole that illuminates the characters and their values. The mood is sometimes light and buoyant, sometimes deadly serious. The writing (that is, Huck's storytelling and the characters' conversations) is a delight—richly descriptive, humorous, and suspenseful.But it is not true, as some have observed, that Huck's first-person narration and the conversation of the strange mixture of characters represent authentic regional dialects.

.....Twain learned to write this way from writers of "local color," an American literary movement of the last half of the nineteenth century. Besides presenting narratives in a regional dialect, local-color writers, or "local colorists," attempted to portray life in the various sections of burgeoning America.

Lecture 13: American Drama: *Trifles*, A One-act Play

Trifles

A Play by Susan Glaspell (1876-1948)

Plot Summary

.....On a very cold morning, Sheriff Peters enters the dreary kitchen of murdered victim John Wright's farmhouse with a man named Hale and the county attorney, George Henderson.

With them are the wives of Peters and Hale. After they gather around the kitchen stove to warm themselves, the sheriff asks Hale to recount for Henderson what he saw in the house the previous morning, when he found Wright's body. However, Henderson first wants to know whether anything at the crime scene has been disturbed. The sheriff assures him that everything is the same as it was the day before. He notes, though, that he had sent his deputy, Frank, to the farmhouse earlier to build the stove fire, "but I told him not to touch anything except the stove—and you know Frank."

.....Hale then tells his story. While he and a helper, Harry, were on their way to town with a load of potatoes, Hale stopped his wagon at the farmhouse just after eight o'clock to try to persuade Wright to go in with him on a party telephone. He knocked, thought he heard someone asking him to enter, and went in. He then saw Mrs. Wright in her rocker fidgeting with her apron. She seemed preoccupied. When he asked to see John, she laughed. He repeated his request, and she told him he could not see John.

....."Isn't he home?" Hale asked.

.....She said yes.

....."Then why can't I see him?"

....." 'Cause he's dead," she said.

.....When Hale asked what he died of, she replied, "He died of a rope around his neck."

.....Hale fetched Harry, and the two men went upstairs and found Wright's body lying on the bed. Mrs. Wright, seemingly unconcerned, said someone must have entered the room during the night and strangled him. She didn't hear anything, she said, because "I sleep sound."

.....At that point, Hale says, Harry went to the Rivers place nearby to call the coroner or medical examiner, Dr. Lloyd. Meanwhile, Mrs. Wright moved to another chair. Shortly thereafter, Harry returned and a little while later Dr. Lloyd and the sheriff arrived.

....."I guess that's all I know that you don't," Hale tells Henderson.

.....Henderson looks around the kitchen, then opens a cupboard door and finds a sticky substance. The women go over and take a look, and Mrs. Peters says, "Oh, her fruit; it did freeze," she tells Mrs. Hale. Then she tells Henderson that Mrs. Wright used to worry that her jars of fruit would freeze and break if the stove fire went out.

The men then poke fun at the women for showing concern about the preserves at a time when they are investigating a murder.....SHERIFF. Well, can you beat the women! Held for murder and worryin' about her preserves.

.....COUNTY ATTORNEY. I guess before we're through she may have something more serious than preserves to worry about.

.....HALE. Well, women are used to worrying over trifles....."And yet, for all their worries, what would we do without the ladies?" Henderson says, washing his hands. Noting how disorderly the kitchen looks—with its unwashed pans, a dish towel on the table, and the dirty towels with which he wipes his hands—he comments, "Not much of a housekeeper, would you say ladies?"

.....Mrs. Hale points out in Mrs. Wright's defense that there is a lot of work to be done on a farm.

.....When Henderson questions her about her relationship with Mrs. Wright, Mrs. Hale says she hadn't seen the woman in more than a year even though they were neighbors.

....."It never seemed a very cheerful place," she says. She adds that John Wright wasn't exactly a cheerful person.

.....The sheriff notes that his wife will be picking up some clothes for Mrs. Wright and taking them to the jail. Henderson gives his approval but says he will want to see what she takes. After the men go upstairs to view the crime scene, Mrs. Hale defends Mrs. Wright for "not having things slicked up when she had to come away in a hurry." She also retrieves a jar of cherry preserves and says Mrs. Wright will feel bad when she finds out it is the only jar of fruit still intact after she worked so hard on her canning.

.....After they gather the clothes—including a shawl and an apron that Mrs. Wright requested—Mrs. Hale examines a skirt, then observes that Mr. Wright was a penny-pincher. That may have been the reason that Mrs. Wright kept to the house rather than taking part in local social activities. Before she married John Wright, she says, Minnie Foster wore pretty clothes and belonged to the church choir. "But that—oh, that was thirty years ago."

.....Mrs. Peters says, "Do you think she did it?"

....."I don't think she did. Asking for an apron and her little shawl. Worrying about her fruit."

.....Mrs. Peters says her husband wants to find a motive for the murder, like anger, but Mrs. Hale says she sees no signs of anger. She adds that "it seems kind of sneaking" to lock her up and then come out and go through her house. As they examine piecework that Mrs. Wright apparently planned to use to make a quilt, Mrs. Hale notes, "It's log cabin pattern. Pretty, isn't it? I wonder if she was goin' to quilt or just knot it?"

.....Just then, the men come downstairs. The sheriff, overhearing the women's conversation, says, "They wonder if she was going to quilt it or just knot it." The three men laugh. Then they go out to the barn to investigate.

.....While the women sit at the kitchen table, Mrs. Hale examines the blocks to be used for the quilt. All had been sewn evenly except one.

....."It's all over the place! Why, it looks as if she didn't know what she was about!" Mrs. Hale says.

.....She pulls out some stitches, threads a needle, and begins to finish it properly. Meanwhile, while looking in a cupboard for paper and string with which to wrap Mrs. Wright's belongings, Mrs. Peters finds a bird cage and asks her companion whether Minnie had a bird. Mrs. Hale doesn't know, but she remembers that a man was in the neighborhood the previous year selling canaries. Mrs. Peters notes that a hinge on the cage door had been pulled a part.

....."Looks as if someone must have been rough with it," Mrs. Hale says.

.....She puts down her sewing and expresses regret that she did not visit Mrs. Wright in the past year. She says John Wright was an upright man who didn't drink and was good to his word. However, he was also a "hard man," she says, "like a raw wind that gets to the bone."

.....Mrs. Hale suggests that Mrs. Peters take the quilting material to the jail with her so Mrs. Wright will have something to do. Mrs. Peters thinks it's a good idea. When they rummage through the sewing basket for the required material, Mrs. Hale finds a box containing a piece of silk wrapped around a dead bird with a wrung neck. The women are horrified. When they hear the men approaching, Mrs. Hale hides the box under quilting pieces.

.....As the sheriff and the county attorney enter, the latter notices the cage and says, "Has the bird flown?"

.....Mrs. Hale says she thinks a cat got it, then ran away.

.....Henderson reports that there was no sign that anyone broke into the house and that the rope appeared to belong to the Wrights. When he and the sheriff go back upstairs, Mrs. Hale tells Mrs. Peters that Mrs. Wright apparently liked the bird and was going to bury it in the box. It was John Wright who killed it, she concludes, because he didn't like it—"a thing that sang. She [Mrs. Wright] used to sing. He killed that, too." Mrs. Peters says, "We don't know who killed the bird . . . [and] we don't know who killed him [Wright]."

.....To have a bird sing for you in such a dreary house, Mrs. Hale says, must have lifted Mrs. Wright's spirits. It must have seemed very quiet after the bird died.

....."I know what stillness is," Mrs. Peters says. "When we homesteaded in Dakota, and my first baby died—after he was two years old, and me with no other then—"

.....But, she says, "The law has got to punish the crime, Mrs. Hale." Mrs. Hale recalls when Minnie sang in the choir and wore nice clothes. "Who's going to punish that?" she says, implying that John Wright was responsible for causing Minnie to withdraw from society.

.....They decide to wrap the jar of preserves with her other belongings and allow her to think that all of her canned fruit remains intact.

.....When the men come down, Henderson remarks that "everything is perfectly clear" except the motive. The jury will need a motive. Hale reenters from the outside and says the team of horses is ready. Henderson says he will remain behind to study the crime scene more carefully. When the sheriff asks him whether he wants to inspect the items the women gathered for Mrs. Wright, Henderson says, "Oh, I guess they're not very dangerous things the ladies have picked up."

.....At the sheriff's suggestion, he and Henderson check the windows in another room for clues. Meanwhile, Mrs. Hale snatches up the box containing the canary and puts it in her coat pocket.

.....When the men return to the kitchen, the sheriff says jokingly, "Well, Henry, at least we found out that she was not going to quilt it. She was going to—what is it you call it, ladies!"

....."We call it—knot it, Mr. Henderson," Mrs. Hale says.

Glossary of Literary Terms: Drama

Act: A major section of a play. Acts are divided into varying numbers of shorter scenes. From ancient times to the nineteenth century, plays were generally constructed of five acts, but modern works typically consist of one, two, or three acts. Examples of five-act plays include the works of Sophocles and Shakespeare, while the plays of Arthur Miller commonly have a three-act structure.

Characterization

The means by which writers present and reveal characters. Although techniques of characterization are complex, writers typically reveal characters through their speech, dress, manner, and actions. Readers come to understand the character Miss Emily in Faulkner's story "A Rose for Emily" through what she says, how she lives, and what she does.

Climax

The turning point of the action in the plot of a play or story. The climax represents the point of greatest tension in the work.

Comedy

A type of drama in which the characters experience reversals of fortune, usually for the better. In comedy, things work out happily in the end. Comic drama may be either romantic--characterized by a tone of tolerance and geniality--or [satiric](#). Satiric works offer a darker vision of human nature, one that ridicules human folly. Shaw's *Arms and the Man* is a romantic comedy; Chekhov's *Marriage Proposal* is a satiric comedy.

Conflict/Plot is the struggle found in fiction. Conflict/Plot may be internal or external and is best seen in (1) Man in conflict with another Man; (2) Man in conflict in Nature; (3) Man in conflict with self.

Dialogue

The conversation of characters in a literary work. In fiction, dialogue is typically enclosed within quotation marks. In plays, characters' speech is preceded by their names.

Foreshadowing is the use of hints or clues to suggest what will happen later in literature.

Hyperbole is exaggeration or overstatement.

Opposite of [Understatement](#)

Example:

I'm so hungry I could eat a horse.

He's as big as a house.

Irony is an implied discrepancy between what is said and what is meant. The use of words to convey the opposite of their literal meaning; a statement or situation where the meaning is contradicted by the appearance or presentation of the idea.

Three kinds of irony:

1. *verbal irony* is when an author says one thing and means something else.
2. *dramatic irony* is when an audience perceives something that a character in the literature does not know.
3. *irony of situation* is a discrepancy between the expected result and actual results.

Monologue

A speech by a single character without another character's response.

Soliloquy

A speech in a play that is meant to be heard by the audience but not by other characters on the stage. If there are no other characters present, the soliloquy represents the character thinking aloud. Hamlet's "To be or not to be" speech is an example.

Scene A subdivision of an [Act](#) of a [drama](#), consisting of continuous action taking place at a single time and in a single location. The beginnings and endings of scenes may be indicated by clearing the stage of actors and props or by the entrances and exits of important [characters](#).

The first act of William Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale* is comprised of two scenes.

Tragedy

A type of drama in which the characters experience [reversals](#) of fortune, usually for the worse. In tragedy, [catastrophe](#) and suffering await many of the characters, especially the hero. Examples include Shakespeare's *Othello* and *Hamlet*; Sophocles' *Antigone* and *Oedipus the King*, and Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*.

Lecture 14: More on *Trifles*

Trifles

A Play by Susan Glaspell (1876-1948)

Setting

.....The time is the early twentieth century during cold weather. The action takes place in the kitchen of a farmhouse in the American Midwest. The author describes the scene and the characters as follows:

The kitchen in the now abandoned farmhouse of John Wright, a gloomy kitchen, and left without having been put in order—unwashed pans under the sink, a loaf of bread outside the breadbox, a dish towel on the table—other signs of incomplet work. At the rear, the outer door opens, and the Sheriff comes in, followed by the county Attorney and Hale. The Sheriff and Hale are men in middle life, the county Attorney is a young man; all are much bundled up and go at once to the stove. They are followed by the two women—the Sheriff's Wife first; she is a slight wiry woman, a thin nervous face.

Mrs. Hale is larger and would ordinarily be called more comfortable looking, but she is disturbed now and looks fearfully about as she enters. The women have come in slowly and stand close together near the door. (Glaspell)

Characters

John Wright: Murdered victim who lived with his wife in a farmhouse. He was said to be an upright but "hard" man.

Minnie Foster Wright: Wife of John Wright and his accused murderer. She is being held in the county jail. The dialogue in the play suggests that her husband, though honest and clean-living, was a taskmaster and a miser who made life miserable for his wife. Apparently, he wrung the neck of a canary that his wife kept in a cage to sing and brighten her dreary life. In retaliation, the dialogue suggests, Mrs. Wright killed her husband in similar fashion, wringing his neck with a rope.

Mr. Hale: Man who tells the sheriff and the county attorney that he stopped at the Wright place on his way to town with a wagonload of potatoes. With him was his helper Harry. Hale planned to ask John Wright to share with him the cost of a party telephone line. After entering the Wright farmhouse, Hale and Harry discovered the body of John Wright. The county attorney calls upon Hale to recount what he saw.

Harry: Mr. Hale's helper.

Sheriff Peters: County lawman who holds Mrs. Wright in jail.

George Henderson: County attorney. He and Peters scour the farmhouse for clues that will hold up in a court trial.

Mrs. Hale: Wife of Mr. Hale. While the sheriff and the county attorney search the Wright property for evidence, Mrs. Hale and the sheriff's wife discover clues to the murder among trivial items they find in the kitchen.

Mrs. Peters: Wife of the sheriff.

Frank: Deputy sheriff.

Dr. Lloyd: County coroner.

Type of Work and Year of Publication

Trifles is a one-act play centering on two women who discover murder clues that county officials regard as trivial. But the play is not a murder mystery. Rather, it is a cultural and psychological study that probes the status of women in society and their intuitive grasp of reality. Glaspell wrote the play in 1916 for the Provincetown Players, a Massachusetts acting group that she and her husband, George Cram Cook, founded in Massachusetts in 1915.

The Title's Meanings

The title refers to more than the items in the Wright home that Peters, Henderson, and Hale regard as irrelevant and Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale regard as significant. It also refers to the men's view of the women as trifles and their observations as unimportant. It is likely also that the murdered victim regarded the bird as an annoying trifle. To Mrs. Wright, it was apparently one of her few sources of joy.

Climax

.....The climax occurs when the two women discover the dead bird, enabling them to envision the events leading up to the murder of John Wright.

Symbols

Bird: Mrs. Wright's spirit.

Cage: John Wright's oppression (or immuration) of his wife and her spirit.

Stove, Cold House, and Broken Jars: When the stove fire goes out, the house temperature drops below freezing and all but one of the jars of preserves break. The stove fire appears to represent John and Minnie Wright's marriage. The fire probably goes out just before or immediately after the murder. The resulting freezing temperatures crack the jars of preserves, apparently representing Minnie's mental well being. The jar that remains intact seems to symbolize the modicum of sanity left to her and the hope for a brighter future that Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters envision for her.

Unevenly Sewn Quilt Block: Mrs. Wright's disturbed mental condition.

Rope: Minnie Wright's usurpation of male power. Strangulation is a man's method of killing. In her rebellion against her domineering husband, Minnie musters the strength to murder like a man, thus perversely asserting her equality.

Themes

Casting Off Male Oppression

.....In 1916, when Glaspell wrote *Trifles*, male-dominated society continued to deny women the right to vote and severely limited their opportunities in offices, industries, legislatures, and the marketplace. In the home, the husband was king and the wife a mere vassal. In carrying out one of the most important and demanding tasks in all of society, rearing children, she frequently received little or no help from her spouse. The typical lower- or middle-class wife spent much of her time in the kitchen, cooking, baking, canning, and stoking the stove fire. In "leisure" hours, she sewed, knitted, darned, and quilted. Women who worked outside the home usually held jobs as secretaries, clerks, waitresses, nannies, housekeepers, washerwomen, and manual laborers in factories. There was no minimum wage for these women. Rare was the female physician, lawyer, archeologist, business executive, or professional athlete. However, thanks in large part to pioneering work by women social reformers in the nineteenth century, the women of the early twentieth century began to demand fairer treatment and equal rights. Glaspell's play presents one radical woman rebel, Mrs. Wright, who goes to the extreme to free herself of male domination. It also presents two quiet rebels, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters, who side with Mrs. Wright and withhold evidence that the sheriff and the county attorney need to establish a motive for Mrs. Wright's alleged crime.

Women's Intuition

.....So-called women's intuition demonstrates its power in this play when Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters discover household items, which the men regard as trifles, that lead to the establishment of a motive for Mrs. Wright's crime. The implication here is that women possess abilities that can complement and augment those of men. A society that limits women's use of their talents is the poorer for doing so.

Irony

.....Sheriff Peters and County Attorney George Henderson pride themselves on their powers of detection and logical reasoning. But it is the two women, Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale, who discover the clues and establish a motive amid seemingly innocuous items in the Wright home. The trifles with which the men say the women concern themselves turn out to be the key evidence that the men are looking for. The story ends with an ironic exchange between Henderson and Mrs. Hale:

COUNTY ATTORNEY (facetiously). Well, Henry, at least we found out that she was not going to quilt it. She was going to—what is it you call it, ladies!

MRS. HALE (her hand against her pocket). We call it—knot it, Mr. Henderson

Trifles is seen as an example of early [feminist](#) drama. The two female characters, Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale, are able to sympathize with Minnie, the victim's wife, and understand her possible motive, which leads them to the evidence against her. The men, meanwhile, are blinded by their cold, emotionless investigation of material facts. The female characters find the body of a canary, with its neck wrung, killed in the same way as John Wright, thus leading them to the conclusion that Minnie was the murderer. The male characters are prejudiced in believing that nothing important can be discovered in areas of the house where Minnie spent most of her time. Their minds are clouded by prejudice and they disregard important clues as being mere "trifles" that women concern themselves with. They search the barn and the bedroom, places where men have dominance, rather than the kitchen, the only place where a woman would be in charge. One important line, spoken by the sheriff, says of the kitchen "Nothing here but kitchen things." This dismissal of the importance of a woman's life and the male reluctance to enter the "women's sphere" is key in the men's failure to discover the crucial evidence for the case.

The most important evidence, the dead canary that the two women find, was hidden in Minnie's sewing basket. The men scorn the [domestic sphere](#), even kicking some of the items in contempt.

The two women, having pieced together the murder, face the moral dilemma of telling the men about the motive or protecting Minnie, whom they see as a victim. Their choice raises questions about solidarity among women, the meaning of justice, and the role of women in society as a source of justice.

Study Questions and Writing Topics

1..Analyze the following passage from the play, then answer the question that follows it:

MRS. HALE. Well, I guess John Wright didn't wake when they was slipping that rope under his neck.

MRS. PETERS. No, it's strange. It must have been done awful crafty and still. They say it was such a --funny way to kill a man, rigging it all up like that.

MRS. HALE. That's just what Mr. Hale said. There was a gun in the house. He says that's what he can't understand.....Why didn't Mrs. Wright use the gun instead of the rope to kill her husband?

2..Mrs.Peters hesitates to cover up for Minnie Wright, twice reminding Mrs. Hale that the killer must answer for the crime. However, shehas a change of heart. Find the passage in the play (near the end) indicating that she has decided to go along with a coverup.

3..Imagine what life was like for Minnie Wright when John Wright was alive. Then write a page of dialogue that begins when Mrs. Wrightasks her husband for money to buy new clothes.

4..Write an essay that compares and contrasts life for a typical American wife of the early twentieth century with life for a typicalAmerican wife of the twenty-first century.

5..If Mrs. Wright is found innocent for lack of incriminating evidence, do you believe her conscience will eventually make her confess thecrime?

6..If Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters change their minds and decide to testify against Minnie Wright, would the evidence they discovered beenough to convict Mrs. Wright of murder?.