

SELECTED READINGS  
IN  
AMERICAN LITERATURE

美国文学选读

编者 翟士钊



河南大学出版社

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## PREFACE

It is difficult to make a representative selection from 150 years of literary works when one is limited to twenty authors. But a general introduction to American literature for students of English as a foreign language must do exactly that. Faced with this problem, Professor Zhai has made some wise choices.

There is a nice mix of drama, poetry, short fiction, and excerpts from longer fiction in this book. Prof. Zhai's short, lucid introductions to each period and writer provide the student with a comprehensive view of American literary development, while four of the five non-fiction essays are important critical comment by leading writers. They discuss individual concerns of each period.

With years of experience in teaching American literature, Prof. Zhai has written short notes in simple language on points in the texts which are likely to give students trouble. This will enable advanced students to read for themselves, while teachers can use more classroom time discussing content and style of the texts.

A nation's literature reflects its culture, and in turn becomes part of its culture. Although this book can give only a brief view, that view is panoramic—the farm and the city; the worker, the soldier, the businessman; the rich and the poor, the common man. It takes us from the time when the American frontier was still open, and Huck Finn could plan to “light out for Injun territory,” to when the modern salesman can only dream of

doing so, while he spends his life selling stockings for someone else.

In compiling this book, Professor Zhai has performed a service to both teachers and students of American literature.

Shirley Wood

# CONTENTS

## PREFACE

## PART ONE

<b>THE AGE OF ROMANTICISM</b> .....	( 1 )
<b>I WASHINGTON IRVING</b> (1783—1859) .....	( 8 )
Rip Van Winkle .....	( 11 )
<b>II RALPH WALDO EMERSON</b> (1803—1882) .....	( 33 )
Nature (VIII Prospects) .....	( 35 )
<b>III NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE</b> (1804—1864) .....	( 45 )
The Scarlet Letter (Chapters 1, 17, and 18) .....	( 49 )
<b>IV WALT WHITMAN</b> (1819—1892) .....	( 71 )
Song of Myself (20, 30, 31, and 46) .....	( 74 )
I Hear America Singing .....	( 78 )
I Hear It Was Charged Against Me .....	( 79 )
I Saw in Louisiana a Live-Oak Growing .....	( 80 )
One's-Self I Sing .....	( 81 )

## PART TWO

<b>THE AGE OF REALISM</b> .....	( 84 )
<b>V MARK TWAIN</b> (1853—1910) .....	( 91 )
The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn	

	(Chapters 16 and 31) .....	( 96)
<b>VI HENRY JAMES</b> (1843—1916) .....		(122)
The Art of Fiction (Excerpt) .....		(126)
<b>VII O. HENRY</b> (1862—1910) .....		(141)
The Gift of the Magi .....		(143)
The Cop and the Anthem .....		(152)
<b>VIII THEODORE DREISER</b> (1871—1945) .....		(165)
An American Tragedy (Book Two: Chapter 47) ...		(168)

### **PART THREE**

	<b>MODERN AMERICAN LITERATURE</b> .....	(192)
<b>IX ROBERT FROST</b> (1874—1963) .....		(201)
Mending Wall .....		(203)
The Road Not Taken .....		(205)
Fire and Ice .....		(206)
Dust of Snow .....		(206)
Design .....		(207)
Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening .....		(207)
<b>X T. S. ELIOT</b> (1888—1965) .....		(210)
The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock .....		(213)
Tradition and the Individual Talent .....		(222)
<b>XI SINCLAIR LEWIS</b> (1885—1951) .....		(236)
Babbitt (Chapters 9 and 25) .....		(239)
<b>XII EUGENE O'NEILL</b> (1888—1953) .....		(263)
The Hairy Ape (Scenes 2, 3, and 8) .....		(266)
<b>XIII F. SCOTT FITZGERALD</b> (1896—1940) .....		(285)
The Great Gatsby (Chapter 7) .....		(289)
<b>XIV WILLIAM FAULKNER</b> (1897—1962) .....		(326)

	Barn Burning .....	(329)
	Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech .....	(353)
XV	<b>ERNEST HEMINGWAY</b> (1899—1961) .....	(359)
	The Killers .....	(363)
	The Old Man and the Sea (Excerpt) .....	(377)
XVI	<b>JOHN STEINBECK</b> (1902—1968) .....	(398)
	Of Mice and Men (Chapters 5 and 6) .....	(401)
XVII	<b>RALPH ELLISON</b> (1914—1994) .....	(427)
	The Invisible Man (Prologue) .....	(429)
XVIII	<b>SAUL BELLOW</b> (1915— ) .....	(445)
	A Father-to-Be .....	(448)
XX	<b>ARTHUR MILLER</b> (1915— ) .....	(464)
	Death of a Salesman (Excerpt from Act I) .....	(467)
	Tragedy and the Common Man .....	(494)
XX	<b>JOSEPH HELLER</b> (1923— ) .....	(503)
	Catch-22 (Chapter 40) .....	(505)
	后 记 .....	(521)

## PART ONE

### THE AGE OF ROMANTICISM

Early American literature got its wings from the Enlightenment that came to the New World as late as the latter half of the eighteenth century. With a belief that they were a chosen people specially favored by God, New Englanders took a vital interest in the betterment of their lives. Under the influence of the European Enlightenment they fostered the spirit of inquiry, turned to reason and rationality, and became more optimistic as to the improvement of human society. New ideas in science and sociology were soon assimilated and developed. Benjamin Franklin (1706—1790), a writer as well as a statesman and scientist, was one of the most prominent figures in the movement. His well-known kite-flying experiment with electricity won him great honors. While borrowing from Puritan teachings his famous Thirteen Virtues, he actually deviated from Puritanism<sup>①</sup> by advocating

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① Puritans came from the Established Church of England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. They were so called because they wished to purify the forms and rituals of the Church. Though it was pilgrims that first came to New England, yet Puritanism soon became the dominant faith with its rather gloomy outlook on life. The Puritans held that man lived to suffer and he must toil mightily for the glory of God. Their doctrine was widely known for its extremely rigid and strict morality.

both personal happiness and social well-being. His ideal of a material success resulting from honesty and hard work was virtually the American Dream in embryo. His most important works were *Poor Richard's Almanac* (1733—1758), a collection of popular sayings, and his *Autobiography* (1771—1790), first classic of American Literature, which was considerably influential in the shaping of the American spirit.

The shattering of the yoke of colonialism inspired Americans with the spirit of freedom and individualism. Romanticism,<sup>①</sup> which had already been in full flush in Europe, naturally came to dominate the American world of literature. The first representatives of the Romantic movement included Irving, Cooper, and Poe. The first American man of letters to win international fame, Washington Irving (1783—1859) was best known for his pleasant collections of essays and tales. James Fenimore Cooper (1789—1851) was the first American novelist, as Irving was the first general writer, to acquire favor from both American and European readers. His first successful novel was *The Spy* (1821), praising patriotism during the American Revolution. But his enduring fame came from his “Leather Stocking Tales” which were made up of *The Pioneers* (1823), *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), *The Prairie* (1827), *The Pathfinder* (1840), and *The Deerslayer* (1841). In the series, Natty Bumppo the no-

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① Romanticism rose in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In contrast to classicism it is associated with imagination and creation of individuality. Romantic writers attach importance to the portrayal of figures of distinctive characters. They reproduce life in their writings according to their ideal and prefer imaginative, even fantastic vision to restriction of objective depiction, passion to elegance, and irregular beauty to perfect proportion.

ble and daring frontiersman not only embodies the author's moral ideal but conveys his reflection on civilization as well. Divergent evaluations were given to Edgar Allan Poe (1809—1849). In point of fact his poetry had a profound effect on the French symbolists<sup>①</sup> and his stories of horror and detection initiated a very popular literary genre.

One of the characteristics of the American Romantic movement was that it took a predominantly philosophical tone. In the 1830s a group of intellectuals began meeting informally for philosophical discussion, and, drawing nourishment from foreign thinkers, the German romantic philosophers included, formed the Transcendentalist Club. To free people from the still existing straitjacket of Puritan theology the Transcendentalists preached a complete break with tradition and custom, encouraged individualism and self-reliance, and proposed Nature as the new Bible. They held that man can intuitively transcend the limits of his senses and directly reach truth. Thus feeling was exalted over reason, intuitions and impulses over external authority, and individual expressions over conventions. In their eyes everything in the world was a microcosm containing within itself all the laws and meanings of existence. Man should turn to Nature to renew his spirit and to make out its revelations. In addition, the worth of a man as an individual also received a high assessment. Every man was endowed with a greatness in him that needed to be set free: "A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light

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<sup>①</sup> Symbolism, as a literary movement, developed in the last part of the nineteenth century and presented a direct challenge to realism. Its chief characteristic is its use of symbols, which, as concrete manifestations of subtle emotions and thoughts, are ideal tools for writers in exploring the psychological dimensions and implications of character and action.

which flashes across his mind from within, more than the lustre of the firmament of bards and sages." The principle of self-reliance helped free the young nation from the shackles of tradition and promoted the spirit of democracy.

Transcendentalism greatly contributed to the moral and intellectual life of the United States. In its insistence on individualism and idealism it gave a forceful impetus to the development of a new and distinctly American culture. Nevertheless, Transcendentalism had its apparent weaknesses. In its somewhat mystical doctrines natural and moral laws are confused. Never a complete philosophical system, it borrowed from many sources but reconciled few of them. Consistency was neglected and rebuked as "the hobgoblin of small minds."

Most outstanding of the Transcendentalists were two literary figures, Emerson and Thoreau. Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803—1882), undoubtedly the chief spokesman, was hailed as both a poet and a philosopher. He traveled and lectured widely, disseminating his radical yet fantastic ideas. His claim that a man must be a nonconformist encouraged many reform movements. His younger friend and disciple, Henry David Thoreau (1817—1862) was another representative of the Transcendentalist movement. He was an ardent lover and observer of nature. He built himself a cabin in the woods by Walden Pond, and lived there for two years. His experiences there were later reported in *Walden, or Life in the Woods* (1854), a series of eighteen essays describing his idealistic creed as well as natural phenomena. Thoreau was fiercely against the materialistic values of the American society. He thought it unnecessary "that a man should earn his living by the sweat of his brow," insisting that people should reduce their bodily wants, and live simply and wisely so as to gain time for a

pursuit of truth through study and meditation. He was also opposed to inexpedient and coercive government. "That government is best which governs not at all" was his belief. His famous essay "Civil Disobedience" (1849) made him the initiator of the doctrine of non-violent resistance, of which Mahatma Gandhi<sup>①</sup> in India and Dr Martin Luther King<sup>②</sup> in the U. S. were two practitioners. Thoreau himself once refused to pay his Massachusetts poll tax as a protest against the government's legal recognition of Southern slavery, and he was therefore jailed for one night.

Two contemporary writers of Emerson and Thoreau were obsessed with original sin and with the never-ending struggle between good and evil. Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804 — 1864), through his use of symbols, produced short stories and novels with everlasting charm. A philosophical allegorist, Herman Melville (1819 — 1891) was not acknowledged to be a first-rate novelist until at least twenty years after his death. He had an eighteen-month voyage on a whaling ship when he was young, and he wrote, "A whale ship was my Yale College and my Harvard." His early books, *Typee* (1846), *Omoo* (1847), *Mardi* (1849), *Redburn* (1849), and *White-Jacket* (1850), were all fresh and appealing tales of the sea. Though they immediately became popular, yet the real important work of his that established his position in America's literary history was *Moby Dick*

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① Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869 — 1948) was an Indian social and political leader. Called a Mahatma (great soul), he insisted on a policy of non-violent non-cooperation to secure independence from Britain. He was assassinated by a Hindu extremist.

② Martin Luther King (1929 — 1968) was leader of the American Negro Civil Rights Movement. His non-violent resistance to segregation won him the 1964 Nobel Peace Prize. He was assassinated while planning a peaceful march.

(1851), widely ignored at the time of its publication. This epic novel was a complex allegory of good and evil, told in terms of the conflict between a whaling captain, Ahab, and a giant white whale, Moby Dick. Melville's later works included *Pierre* (1852), *The Confidence Men* (1857), *Billy Budd* (1924, published posthumously), etc.

Early in the 1820s democratic idealism began to exert influence on the vigorous developing country and greatly promoted the antislavery movement. The voice of the abolitionists found expression in literature among other ways, and the abolitionist literature, in turn, forcefully pushed forward the democratic trend. In 1852 Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811—1896) published her *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the greatest of all antislavery manifestoes, which had the effect of arousing widespread indignation at the evils of slavery. When President Lincoln<sup>①</sup> first met her, he reportedly called her “the little lady who wrote the book that made this big war!” A hint may be drawn here of the impact of the novel.

The American literary field in the nineteenth century blossomed also with poetry. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807—1882) was the most popular poet because he was most interested in such subjects as home, family, nature, and religion, and his style was lyrical as well as conventional. *Evangeline* (1847), *Hiawatha* (1855), and *The Courtship of Miles Standish* (1858) were some of his most admired poems. The real pride of the poets at that time was Walt Whitman (1819—1892). All his life

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① Abraham Lincoln (1809—1865) was elected President in 1861 and immediately the Civil War broke out. On January 1, 1863 the Emancipation Proclamation was issued and slaves in the South were declared free. He was shot by a southern fanatic during his second term of presidency.

Whitman sang the praises of individualism and democracy. The reclusive figure of Emily Dickenson (1830—1886) did not emerge until 1886, when she died and her poems were discovered. A sensitive poet, she wrote over a thousand short lyrics on love and death. Her poetry is remarkable for its striking pictures and original phrasings. In her poetry, even the most familiar things seem to take on new significance and meaning.

Romanticism as a movement in American literary history lasted until after the Civil War. During this period a national literature developed and took shape with novels, short stories, and poems as its principal forms. It was one of the motive forces for the spread of democracy and established new ways of perceiving humanity and the universe. However, the development of industrialism and commercialism strikingly widened the gap between spiritual dreams and the realities of a growing materialism. Conditions for realism gradually ripened.

# I

## WASHINGTON IRVING

(1783—1859)

### About the Author

Born in New York City, Washington Irving was the youngest child of a wealthy merchant. He began reading very early, but when he was sixteen he quit school and entered a law office. In 1804 he traveled in Europe to restore his failing health. After he returned to New York two years later he became a lawyer though he was still taking a true interest in literature. The writing of essays made him famous as an author, and he began writing *History of New York* (1809), which later proved to be his first important success. However, the death of his fiancée during this period profoundly affected him and kept him from creative writing for several years.

In 1815, Irving went to England to take charge of the family business, but three years later, owing to the war and bad management, it went bankrupt. He was then forced to make a living by his pen. He won international fame by publishing *The Sketch Book* (1820), which contained two enduring European, but Americanized folk tales, "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow." With his new literary success, Irving decided to stay in Europe and he successively produced *Bracebridge Hall* (1822), *Tales of a Traveller* (1824), *A Chronicle of the Conquest of Granada* (1829), and a Spanish sketch book *The Alhambra*

(1832).

After an absence of seventeen years Irving returned to the United States. He lived as a country squire, and in 1835 he published *A Tour on the Prairies*. His later works were a series of histories and biographies.

Washington Irving was the first American author who explored native themes and won an international reputation. He contributed, through his writing, to the shift in American literature from the rationalism of the eighteenth century to the sentimental romanticism of the nineteenth century. His popularity came from his quiet humor, taste of satire, and his sticking to values of an older civilization amid the rising materialism and commercialism of the times. He did much to interpret America to Europe and Europe to America. Nevertheless, his writing was not completely American. He was, according to his much younger friend, the English novelist W. M. Thackeray (1811—1863), “a very nice bonhomious old gentleman,” with “a pleasant chirping voice quite natural and unaffected—speaking English, however, not American.”

### On the Selection

Adapted from a German folk tale, *Rip Van Winkle* views a striking contrast between the independent United States and the former British colony from the eye of a native inhabitant after his 20-year sleep. The charm of the story comes from the hero whose character is drawn by Irving in a Romantic way. Rip Van Winkle lives in a peaceful village where nagging from his wife is the most unbearable trouble. He is not diligent nor responsible for the support of his family but gets on well with his fellow vil-