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*Commentary
Readings in*
**AMERICAN
LITERATURE**

丁咏淑 编著

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美国文学选讲

西南师范大学出版社

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Foreword

The English language can be defined as a means of communication or called in a more popular term “a tool”. The learning of it, however, should not be taken merely as obtaining some practical skills. It is especially harmful and most unfortunate if this idea is accepted by English majors, for in their case, English is an academic subject as well, which obviously consists of both language and literature. Nevertheless, the aspect of literature has been very much neglected nowadays, and suitable teaching materials are hard to come by, especially for adult students majoring in English.

It is against this background that I value and recommend COMMENTARY READINGS IN AMERICAN LITERATURE to conscientious English majors, adult learners in particular. With comments and annotations, this book provides its readers a more profitable way to American literature. The readings are highly selective short pieces, but are all in the original from representative works by masters in the major periods of American literary development. A careful study of it, I am sure, will not only better the reader's understanding of American literature, but also improve his ability to read and appreciate literary works.

Lan Renzhe

Introduction

This book is the outcome of my personal experience with the problem of teaching American literature at Sichuan Foreign Languages Institute. The lectures are based on a selection from materials used in teaching from 1983 to 1992; and I have for the most part preserved the lecture form and the informal tone.

In these lectures I was guided by what I consider to be the main objectives of an American literature course: to gain a basic understanding of the sweep of American literature from the colonial period to the present; to learn to recognize the particular contribution of each author; to gain an appreciation of good literature; and to develop skills in reading and analysing literature.

The primary emphasis of the book, however, is upon literary appreciation; to increase our understanding and enjoyment of these works as poetry and fiction; to learn to apprehend the selections with a somewhat greater truth and intensity, so that they may assume in our mind a shape a little less unlike the shape they were in the mind of their authors.

At the end of the book I have included The Glossary of Literary Terms and Skill-building Exercises in Reading Literature. (These exercises are reprinted from Skill Practice Book by McDougal, Littell.) They are intended to help the students master the skills they need to read and enjoy poetry and fiction.

I hope that this book will prove useful in fulfilling the fundamental aim of the college literature course — to bring American literature directly to the students and to teach them to understand and appreciate

literature in general.

My particular thanks go to well-known Professor Wang Zhuoliang of Foreign Language Institute of Beijing, who contributed significantly to this book by autographing the title of the book in his own hand and by generously agreeing to read and comment upon our treatment of a number of selections. I am deeply grateful to Professor Lan Renzhe, President of Sichuan Foreign Languages Institute, who wrote the foreword to the book. I also owe a debt to the many friends who have aided by encouragement, advice and support: Associate Professor Liu Guanghua, Foreign Language Institute of Beijing; Associate Professor Liu Wenzhe, Southwest China Normal University; Associate Professor Fu Canbang, Nanchong Teacher's College; Associate Professor Lou Xinqun, Chongqing University. My acknowledgments are due also to Mr. Du Dajiang of Southwest China Normal University who has helped in many ways in the publication of this book; to Tu Shanfen, Gau Yang, and Lou Ming, senior students, for their painstaking proofreading of the typed copy. Finally, special gratitude goes to Li Jianping and Miao Yu, my colleagues in the Teacher Education Department at Sichuan Foreign Languages Institute, for their patience in typing the final manuscript and their good work in the preparation of a neat and accurate copy for the printer.

Ding Yongshu

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Colonial and Revolutionary Periods

(1608-1800)

American Literature from the Colonial Period through the 18th Century

1. Historical Background

1) Colonization of America

Five hundred years ago the American Continent was the home of the American Indians. The number of them over the whole American Continent was something between fourteen and forty million, with perhaps one million of them living in what is now the United States of America. These Native Americans were divided into many tribes, and in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries there were over seven hundred Indian tribes in North America. These tribes were highly diverse—in language, rituals, religious customs, history, governments, and social organization. Most were peaceful people, settling their differences through negotiation, not war. Each tribe had its own rich folklore and mythology, which were passed on orally to each new generation.

In 1492 Christopher Columbus discovered America. Columbus was an Italian navigator. He believed that the earth is round and he could reach India and the Far Eastern countries of Asia by sailing westward across the Atlantic Ocean. In 1492 when he landed on an island in Central America, he took it for a part of India, and so he called the natives he saw there “Indians.”

The New World discovered by Columbus was vast and rich. There were all the resources necessary for fish, great forests, all the important metals and minerals, and rivers rich in water power. The ruling classes of Europe greedily fell upon this rich world. Colonists from Spain, Holland, Portugal, France and England all came to settle on this vast rich world. They burned down cities, robbed the Indians of their gold and silver, stole their land and killed many people. As a result, Indian society and culture were destroyed. Whole Indian tribes were slaughtered.

The colonization of the present-day United States and Canada by the English and French went somewhat slower, but with the same barbarity. At the beginning of the 17th century, the English colonists began their settlement on North America. In 1607, the London Company gained the right from the English king James the First to set up and manage a settlement in North America. They sent about a hundred people and founded Jamestown. This was the first English Colony.

In 1620 a group of Puritans sailed to North America and founded a settlement, which they called Plymouth. Later several more colonies grew up around Massachusetts (including Plymouth), Rhode Island, Connecticut, and New Hampshire, collectively known as the New England Colonies.

During the years from 1607-1733, English colonists established thirteen colonies along the Atlantic coast of America. More and more people came to immigrate. Most of them were from England, Ireland, France, and Germany.

Slowly but ruthlessly those colonies expanded westward. Large number of Indians were slaughtered. The survivors had to leave their land and retreat into the wilderness in the west. The English colonies were thus built on the bones of the Indians and every inch of the land was stained with their blood.

2) The War of Independence

The thirteen colonies were founded under the authority of Britain and were treated by the British rulers as their private property. The English kings appointed royal governors to rule over the colonies. They stationed royal troops in all the colonies to keep them in subjection. They made over a hundred laws restricting their trade and industry. For instance, the colonies needed iron and steel, but the British government would not allow them to build iron and steel mills; it forced them to buy what they needed from Britain. The colonies grew tobacco and cotton on their great plantations, but they were not allowed to export these to other colonies or countries except through British merchants.

These restrictions enabled the English ruling class—English merchants, ship-owners and politicians to make huge profits, but the colonial people got very angry. As the economy in the colony developed, contradictions between the colonies and Britain became sharper and sharper until they were driven to seek the path of political independence from Britain. They began to get united and carried out an armed struggle against national oppression and for political and economical independence. On July 4, 1776, the thirteen colonies published Declaration of Independence. After seven years of courageous fighting, the thirteen colonies won the war over Britain and became independent. The United States of America was born.

2. American Literature of Colonial and Revolutionary Periods

Basically the first American literature was neither American nor really literature. It was not American, but was essentially an imitation of British literature, because it was the work written by immigrants from England. It was only after the War of Independence that American literature began its own development. Like any literature reflecting the

interests and concerns of a people, it began to serve as a mirror of the political, economical, and cultural conditions of the American society.

It was not really literature, not literature as we know it—in the form of poetry, essays or fiction—but rather an interesting mixture of travel accounts and religious writings. In colonial times, life was hard for the Pilgrims (the group of settlers who arrived in Plymouth, Massachusetts, in 1620), especially for the first years, when everything was uncertain. They faced famine, disease, severe weather, and difficulties with the Indians. They had to adapt themselves to unfamiliar climates and crops; to deal with the Indians; to chart and survey, clear and plant, and build and improvise. In short, they spent much of their time struggling to survive in the new land and were busy making a country out of wilderness.

In such circumstances, the early colonists could naturally find little leisure for either the reading or the writing of polite literature. Few of them had time to devote to writing. The men who created the literature of colonial America were, by and large, not professional writers. What these men wrote grew out of their busy lives: mainly travel accounts and religious writings. This literature was mostly of a practical or a religious nature.

In the revolutionary period, politics took central stage. It is not surprising that most of the literature produced in America between 1765 and 1800 was of a practical nature, urging social or political reform.

So in colonial and revolutionary periods, there were no novels or plays. The major types of literature were accounts of voyages, sermons, histories, diaries, political documents and polemical tracts. This was not really literature, not literature as we know it. Nevertheless, the literature of this era is of great value, especially from an historical perspective. It gives us a record of the nation's beginnings and shows what the first