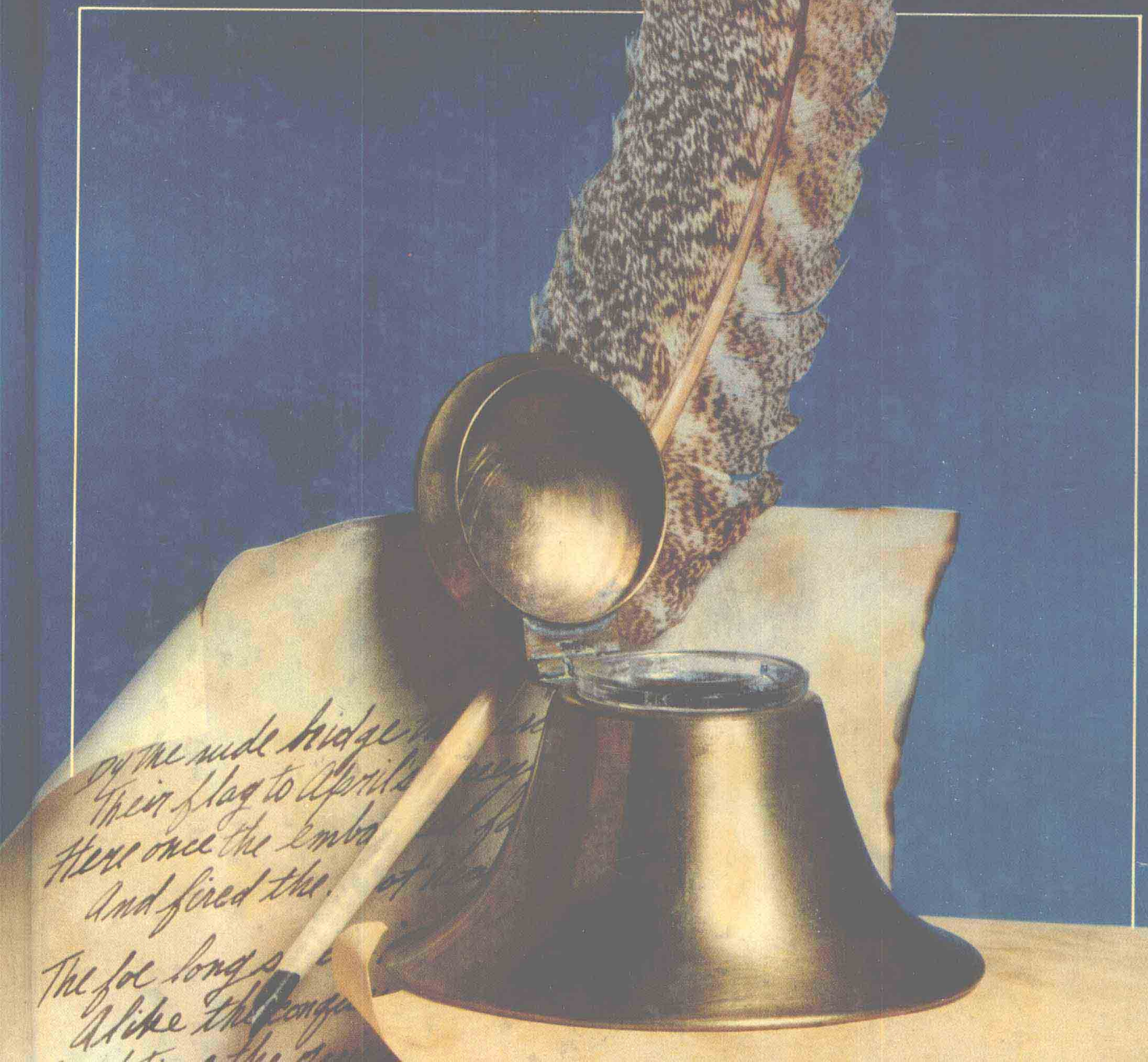


American Literature

GINN LITERATURE SERIES



American Literature

Robert A. Bennett
Senior Author

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Acknowledgments continue on page 750.

Table of Contents

I Major Themes in American Literature	4
SENSE OF PLACE	6
The Gift Outright	Robert Frost 8
Where Mountain Lion Lay Down with Deer	Leslie Marmon Silko 9
from A Discourse of the Plantation of the Southern Colony in Virginia	George Percy 11
from Roughing It	Samuel Langhorne Clemens 18
from Of Time and the River	Thomas Wolfe 25
from A Walker in the City	Alfred Kazin 31
Southbound on the Freeway	May Swenson 35
i yearn	Ricardo Sánchez 37
Iowa Farmer	Margaret Walker 39
THE INDIVIDUAL	41
I Hear America Singing	Walt Whitman 42
Of Individualism in Democratic Countries	Alexis de Tocqueville 45
“The Soul selects her own Society”	Emily Dickinson 47
A Delicate Balance	José Armas 48
The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky	Stephen Crane 52
Lost Sister	Cathy Song 63
The Creative Dilemma	James Baldwin 66
On Being a Granddaughter	Margaret Mead 70
THE AMERICAN DREAM	77
America the Beautiful	Katharine Lee Bates 78
from The Law of the Great Peace	Iroquois Confederacy 80

The Mayflower Compact	William Bradford	83
The Declaration of Independence	Thomas Jefferson	85
Lenox Avenue Mural	Langston Hughes	89
Winter Dreams	F. Scott Fitzgerald	92
<i>from</i> I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings	Maya Angelou	110
I Have a Dream	Martin Luther King, Jr.	115
A Vision Beyond Time and Place	N. Scott Momaday	119
<i>Review</i>		123

2 A New Land 126

Night Chant/Blessing Way	Navaho	128
Now I Am Left	Algonkin	130
<i>from</i> The History of Plymouth Plantation	William Bradford	132
<i>from</i> A History of the Dividing Line	William Byrd	139
Speech to the General Court	John Winthrop	143
To My Dear and Loving Husband	Anne Bradstreet	146
The Author to Her Book	Anne Bradstreet	148
Captivity Narrative	Mary Rowlandson	150
Huswifery	Edward Taylor	156
Meditation Six	Edward Taylor	157
<i>from</i> Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God	Jonathan Edwards	160
<i>Review</i>		163

3 A New Nation 166

The Sale of the Hessians	Benjamin Franklin	169
<i>from</i> Poor Richard's Almanac	Benjamin Franklin	173
Speech in the Virginia Convention	Patrick Henry	175
<i>from</i> The American Crisis	Thomas Paine	180
To the Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth	Phillis Wheatley	188
Letter to Her Husband	Abigail Adams	191

<i>from</i> Notes on the State of Virginia	Thomas Jefferson	194
Letter to Thomas Jefferson	Benjamin Banneker	196
This Is an American	Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur	201
<i>Review</i>		203

4 A New Literature 206

Rip Van Winkle	Washington Irving	208
Thanatopsis	William Cullen Bryant	221
<i>from</i> Self-Reliance	Ralph Waldo Emerson	225
Concord Hymn	Ralph Waldo Emerson	231
Brahma	Ralph Waldo Emerson	232
Young Goodman Brown	Nathaniel Hawthorne	235
My Lost Youth	Henry Wadsworth Longfellow	247
The Tide Rises, the Tide Falls	Henry Wadsworth Longfellow	251
Declaration of Sentiments	Elizabeth Cady Stanton	253
Ain't I a Woman?	Sojourner Truth	258
The Pit and the Pendulum	Edgar Allan Poe	260
To Helen	Edgar Allan Poe	272
Sonnet—To Science	Edgar Allan Poe	273
The City in the Sea	Edgar Allan Poe	275
Where I Lived and What I Lived For	Henry David Thoreau	278
<i>from</i> Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass	Frederick Douglass	289
Bury Me in a Free Land	Frances Watkins Harper	294
Bartleby the Scrivener	Herman Melville	299
<i>Review</i>		325

5 A New Maturity 328

Gettysburg Address	Abraham Lincoln	331
The Death of President Lincoln	Elizabeth Keckley	333

A Noiseless Patient Spider	Walt Whitman	337
One's-Self I Sing	Walt Whitman	338
There Was a Child Went Forth	Walt Whitman	340
"Success is counted sweetest"	Emily Dickinson	345
"Because I could not stop for Death"	Emily Dickinson	346
"After great pain, a formal feeling comes"	Emily Dickinson	349
The Invalid's Story	Samuel Langhorne Clemens	351
Let Me Be a Free Man	Chief Joseph	356
Four Meetings	Henry James	364
A Church Mouse	Mary E. Wilkins Freeman	386
Sympathy	Paul Laurence Dunbar	398
Of the Meaning of Progress	W. E. B. DuBois	401
<i>from</i> The Storm and Other Stories	Kate Chopin	409
<i>Review</i>		415

6 Twentieth Century: The Modern World 418

PROSE

A Wagner Matinée	Willa Cather	420
<i>from</i> Dust Tracks on a Road	Zora Neale Hurston	427
The Secret Life of Walter Mitty	James Thurber	431
The Bear	William Faulkner	440
Big Two-Hearted River: Part II	Ernest Hemingway	452
The Chrysanthemums	John Steinbeck	461
The Man Who Saw the Flood	Richard Wright	469
The Jilting of Granny Weatherall	Katherine Anne Porter	473
Freedom—July, 1940	E. B. White	482

POETRY

Richard Cory	Edwin Arlington Robinson	488
Patterns	Amy Lowell	490
Chicago	Carl Sandburg	494
"The people will live on"	Carl Sandburg	495
Departmental	Robert Frost	499

Birches	<i>Robert Frost</i>	501
Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening	<i>Robert Frost</i>	503
Spring and All: I	<i>William Carlos Williams</i>	506
"Pity me not because the light of day"	<i>Edna St. Vincent Millay</i>	507
"l(a"	<i>e. e. cummings</i>	509
"maggie and milly and molly and may"	<i>e. e. cummings</i>	509
"l"	<i>e. e. cummings</i>	510
A Black Man Talks of Reaping	<i>Arna Bontemps</i>	511
America	<i>Claude McKay</i>	513
Song of the Son	<i>Jean Toomer</i>	514
Musician	<i>Louise Bogan</i>	516
Manhole Covers	<i>Karl Shapiro</i>	518
Song	<i>H. D.</i>	519
What Are Years?	<i>Marianne Moore</i>	521
Silence	<i>Marianne Moore</i>	522
At the Fishhouses	<i>Elizabeth Bishop</i>	523
From the Dark Tower	<i>Countee Cullen</i>	526
<i>Review</i>		527

7 Twentieth Century: American Drama		530
Our Town	<i>Thornton Wilder</i>	533
<i>Review</i>		575

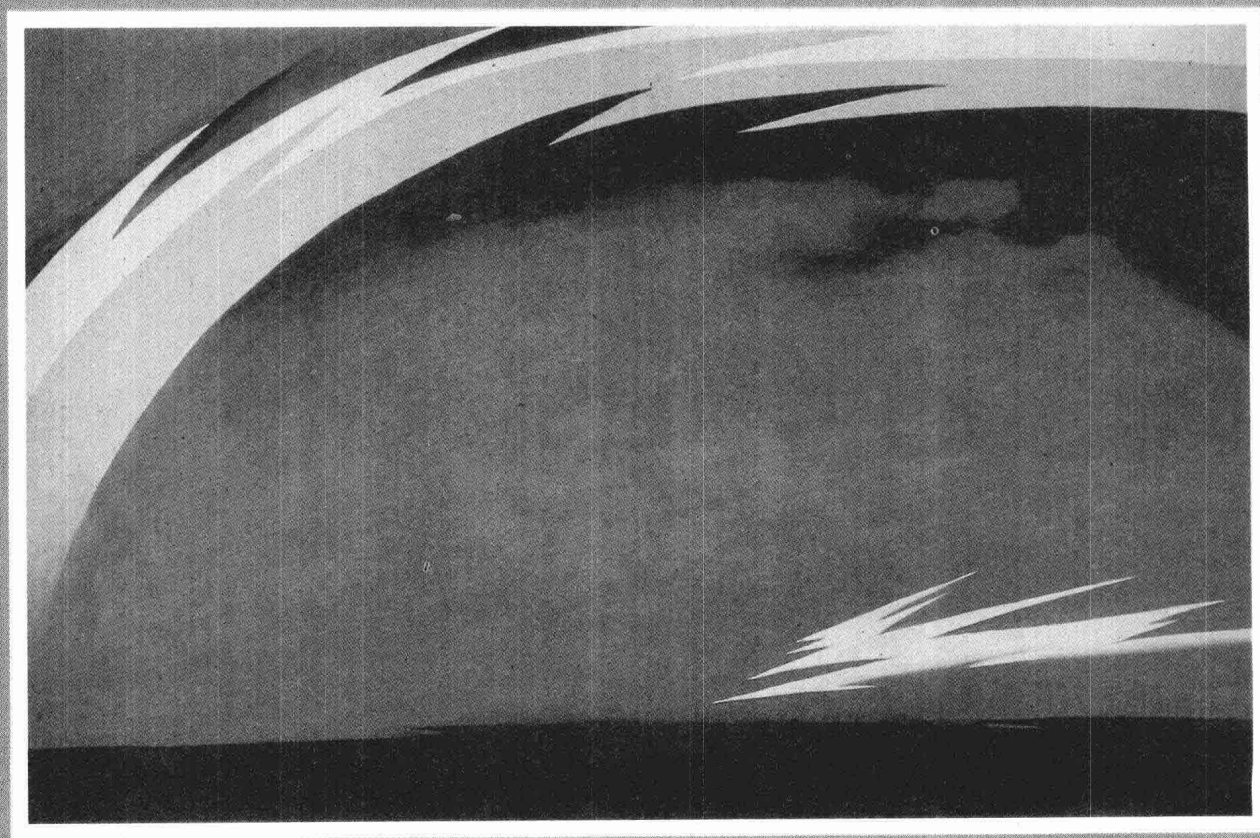
8 Twentieth Century: Our Time	578
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PROSE

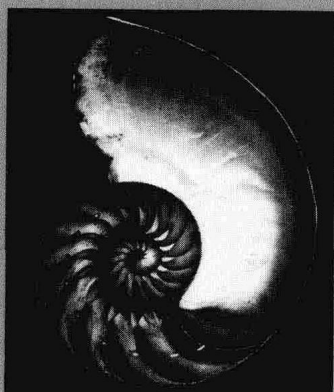
The Prison	<i>Bernard Malamud</i>	580
The Life You Save May Be Your Own	<i>Flannery O'Connor</i>	588
Did You Ever Dream Lucky?	<i>Ralph Ellison</i>	596
The Notebook	<i>Norman Mailer</i>	606
Breach of Promise	<i>Jessamyn West</i>	609

I Stand Here Ironing	Tillie Olsen	623
from The Plum Plum Pickers	Raymond Barrio	629
Man and Daughter in the Cold	John Updike	639
from The Bluest Eye	Toni Morrison	645
A Father-to-Be	Saul Bellow	652
Seeing	Annie Dillard	660
POETRY		
Dead Boy	John Crowe Ransom	668
Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird	Wallace Stevens	670
The Horse Chestnut Tree	Richard Eberhart	673
The Waking	Theodore Roethke	675
Involved	A. R. Ammons	677
truth	Gwendolyn Brooks	678
"Life for my child is simple, and is good"	Gwendolyn Brooks	680
The Beautiful Changes	Richard Wilbur	682
Frederick Douglass	Robert Hayden	684
Astronauts	Robert Hayden	686
Garden of My Childhood	Kuangchi C. Chang	688
Ghost of a Chance	Adrienne Rich	690
Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note	Amiri Baraka	692
Summer Remembered	Isabella Stewart Gardner	694
I Am A Black Woman	Mari Evans	696
Water	Robert Lowell	698
Mushrooms	Sylvia Plath	700
Gold Glade	Robert Penn Warren	702
Alone/December/Night	Victor Hernandez Cruz	704
Courage	Anne Sexton	706
New Face	Alice Walker	708
Dreaming America	Joyce Carol Oates	710
Dream of Rebirth	Roberta Hill	713
<i>Review</i>		715
<hr/>		
Literary Terms Handbook		717
Glossary		731
Index by Types of Literature		743
Index of Vocabulary Skills		746
Index of Authors and Titles		747

American Literature



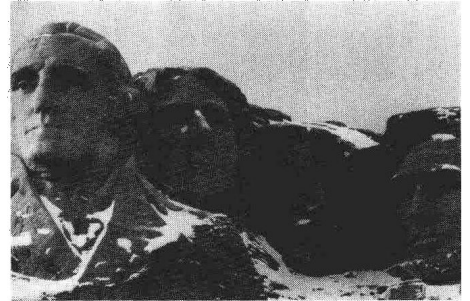
Major Themes in American Literature



MAJOR THEMES IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

IN their reflections on America and Americans our writers have returned again and again to certain ideas or themes. In doing so they have frequently expressed our own half-realized thoughts about ourselves and about America. These themes have grown naturally out of our experience of living in this land. Indeed they are merely extensions of the

effort to describe our environment and our manner of living in it and to express a vision of the future. One could give the themes a variety of names. In this book they are called "Sense of Place," "The Individual," and "The American Dream."





Sense of Place

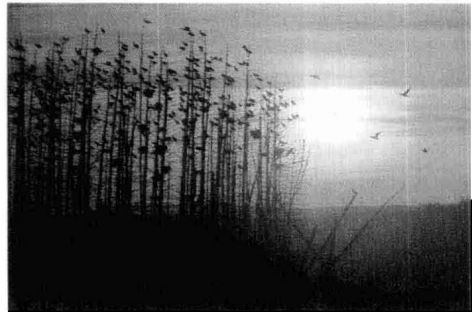
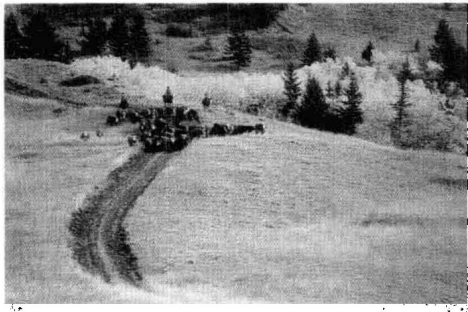
All people, no matter where they reside, develop some “sense of place,” some feeling of identification with home. This feeling operates at many levels—from the home and neighborhood to a region or the entire country. The time may even come when one will identify with earth as opposed to some other planet. The sense of place may involve a great complexity of feelings: loyalty at one level, for example, may well conflict with loyalty at another level. And sometimes the familiarity of home provokes a desire to leave and to try a new place.

There is an additional complication in the American sense of place, deriving from the way the country grew. The Europeans who came here in the seventeenth century had to transfer affections from their birthplaces to a strange and very different place. Such a change is not easily made; nor, when made, easily forgotten. For a long time, Americans from Europe lived with the problem of divided loyalty. While they looked westward to the American frontier and beyond, they also felt the strong cultural pull of Europe. This division of mind and heart has been repeated in all subsequent immigrant groups and was especially painful for those from Africa who were forced to come. As Robert Frost tells us in “The Gift Outright,” we could own America simply by living in it. However, we could not be Americans until we had given ourselves to the land.

Concurrently with this acquisition of a sense of place by foreign settlers, Native Americans have been forced to struggle to maintain their sense of place. This has been difficult in the face of unrelenting pressure for more than three and a half centuries. Yet, Native American speakers and writers continue

their effort to preserve for their people the memory of their original relationship to this land. For example, Leslie Silko’s poem, “Where Mountain Lion Lay Down with Deer,” reflects this effort.





Before We Were the Land's

When President John F. Kennedy was inaugurated in January, 1961, he invited Robert Frost (1874–1963) to read a poem during the ceremony. Frost chose “The Gift Outright,” a poem written some years earlier. As Frost began to read, the slant of winter sunlight on the page made reading difficult

and forced him to stop. Then, as the whole country shared an agony of suspense, the elderly poet put everyone at ease. He raised his head and calmly spoke “The Gift Outright” from memory. (Additional information on Frost is included in Unit 6 on page 499.)

The Gift Outright

ROBERT FROST

The land was ours before we were the land's.
She was our land more than a hundred years
Before we were her people. She was ours
In Massachusetts, in Virginia,
But we were England's, still colonials, 5
Possessing what we still were unpossessed by,
Possessed by what we now no more possessed.
Something we were withholding made us weak
Until we found out that it was ourselves
We were withholding from our land of living, 10
And forthwith found salvation in surrender.
Such as we were we gave ourselves outright
(The deed of gift was many deeds of war)
To the land vaguely realizing westward,
But still unstoried, artless, unenhanced, 15
Such as she was, such as she would become.

Discussion

1. What do you think Frost means by the first five lines? What were we withholding? Why did this make us weak?
2. In lines 11–13 what did we have to do to find “salvation”?
3. How is this poem appropriate to The Sense of Place theme?