

美国文学论述

THE DISCOURSE OF AMERICAN LITERATURE

**Culture & Expression from
Colonization to Present**

by **Bruce A. Ronda**



上海外语教育出版社

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FOREWORD

This book is based on a course given at the Shanghai Foreign Language Institute (now Shanghai International Studies University) during 1984—85, and on the Introduction to American Culture courses I taught at Skidmore College from 1976 to 1984. My students in Shanghai were young Chinese university teachers of English language and English and American literature who used samples of American writing as teaching material. As they often pointed out to me, they were uncertain about the cultural and historical background of the texts they taught and found themselves frequently unable to answer their own students' questions about these texts. These young teachers enthusiastically participated in our course in Shanghai, since it seemed to provide them just the kind of broad cultural overview they required.

As the year progressed and I got to know my students better, they spoke frankly of the need for materials to assist in their teaching of American literature and culture. Would it be possible for me to organize my course notes into a textbook which might be used by the teachers themselves as a kind of outline of a survey course in American Studies, and that also could be used by graduate students who were fluent in English? I agreed, and with the help of Lü Peiying of the Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, set to work on this book. I hope that its publication, much delayed by various difficulties, will serve the purpose for which it was intended.

I wish to dedicate this book to the sixteen students who made up the class in American Culture at the Shanghai Foreign Language Institute, 1984—85. Their example has continually spurred me to keep working on it; I hope it will be of some help to them in their future work and is a reminder of our year together.

PREFACE

The Discourse of American Literature is a book about the interaction between culture and writing in that part of North America which has become the United States. It is meant to be a survey of the cultural forces and changes that have affected the creation of literature, and to show how various pieces of writing relate to the larger forces at work in society at the time of their production.

The Introduction presents the book's main argument: writing (in this case, in America) is a "discourse" and "discourse" is an element of "culture." Discourse is a term popularized by the French philosopher Michel Foucault; it means a system of expression. "Culture" is the second key term in this book. The Introduction describes the various meanings this word has carried, and emphasizes the importance of the current meaning, culture as "way of life." So the argument looks something like this: writing is one of the systems of expression by which a society articulates its culture, its sense of what is real and meaningful. Very often, writing reflects the dominant view of what is real and meaningful; but occasionally we find writers who use language to push at the boundaries, to challenge conventional meanings and to open up new possibilities. Our task throughout this book is to show how American writers make use of, or even reflect, the dominant values and ideals of our mainstream society, but also to show how some of these writers ignore those values and ideals in their

very use of language.

Part One treats the colonization of North America by the English. This is, to be sure, a typical way to tell the story of the settlement of the "New World" by whites, ignoring as it does the experience of native Americans as well as the Spanish, French, Dutch, and Swedish colonizers. But our focus here is on the use of the English language in writing, and the users of that language demand our attention. We consider here several important "Puritan" figures and their use of language discourses—John Winthrop, William Bradford, Cotton Mather, Anne Bradstreet, Edward Taylor, and Mary Rowlandson.

Then, after a description of the white settlement of Virginia and other British North American colonies, we consider the rise of "liberal" thinking in religion and politics, and particularly the advance of a position sometimes called "possessive individualism." Here William Byrd of Virginia and Benjamin Franklin of Pennsylvania are the exemplary users of the language of individualism. In contrast to their emphasis on the emergence of a more worldly, self-oriented society, Jonathan Edwards stressed the importance of religion in a vast revival of religion in the mid-eighteenth century, called The Great Awakening.

Both the "liberal" or Enlightenment spirit and the religious spirit contributed to the intellectual cause of the American Revolution from 1775 to 1783. The Revolutionary era is a particularly fascinating one to study in terms of "discourses," for it shows several different "languages" at work simultaneously. One of the most influential rhetorics is that of "Republicanism," a theory derived from English political radicals emphasizing the constant conflict between the people's virtue and the ruler's tyranny. This language combined neatly with

the Puritan emphasis on being a chosen people and with the Revival's stress on mass conversions. Thus, to many Americans the Revolution became part of a holy crusade to free America from the "Great Satan" of Great Britain.

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, many American writers and critics turned their attention to the issue of "literary nationalism", as we do in Part Two, chapter one. Despite the victory over Great Britain in the Revolutionary War and then again (narrowly) in the War of 1812, American culture was still very dependent on England's. Several theorists spoke of the need to develop an authentic "American" English that would match what they thought were the unique political and cultural circumstances of the infant nation. Several early nineteenth century writers—Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper—responded to some degree, and wrote fiction that combined uniquely American scenes with a familiar high-toned English prose.

This concern for American English matched the growing frontier experience, as white Americans pushed across the Appalachians and into the Ohio River valley, displacing native peoples as they went. Whites also experienced powerful religious revivals, as they distanced themselves from the old church structures of the Northeast and Middle Atlantic regions. In this "Second Great Awakening," we see a distinct "democratizing" of religion, with great emphasis placed on the individual's ability to choose the gift of salvation. The Great Revival also had a more earthly significance; in the wake of revivals, markets and towns sprang up.

In the period between 1820 and 1860, imaginative writing underwent a great revival of its own, sometimes called the "American Renaissance", and this Renaissance is the subject

of chapter three. Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Edgar Allen Poe, Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Herman Melville are the most well-remembered of these literary figures. What is not so well-remembered is that all of them responded intensely to the popular culture and art forms that surrounded them. In his or her own way, each of these major writers took the ideas and literary forms available to them and recombined them into their own distinctive art.

In Part Three, chapter one, we consider the events that lead up to the great Civil War that rends America from 1861 to 1865. Although the South and the rest of the nation had much in common before the early 1830s, after that time the South began to draw steadily apart, developing its own economy and culture which were firmly based on chattel slavery. As this occurred, Northerners organized antislavery societies, at first small and ridiculed, but by the 1850s large in number and influence. In 1860, the new Republican Party, committed to an antislavery policy (or, more accurately, opposition to the extension of slavery into the new territories) nominated Abraham Lincoln for president. Lincoln, as we see in chapter two, won the November election, and the following month, South Carolina seceded from the Union. The war which followed was long, bloody, and immensely destructive. The right of secession was denied, and black slaves were formally freed, although in the Reconstruction that followed the war, the possibility that blacks would enter society on anything like an equal basis was quickly thwarted.

In chapter three, we consider the transformation that began with the war and went on in the years following. We mean here transformations in geography, in industrial expansion,

and in the structure of both population and urban centers. The 1870s through the turn of the century was a great machine age. Accompanying these great transformations, as we see in chapter four, was a fascination with evolution, change, and the "laws of nature", all of which went under the heading of Darwinism. Darwin's ideas about natural selection, which he (mostly) hoped to limit to the natural, nonhuman world, spilled out into the world of human society, culture, and history, through the help of such popularizers as Herbert Spencer and William Graham Sumner.

Meanwhile (chapter five) working people responded to the vast wealth and control that a handful of capitalists were exercising over the American economy by organizing into unions and engaging in strikes. Thousands of strikes took place by workers who suffered from poor working conditions, low wages, and tyrannical bosses. But not until the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt, in the early twentieth century and much more fully the presidency of Franklin Roosevelt in the 1930s, did government take the side of workers; mostly, in the late nineteenth century, government, the press, and business colluded to keep power in the hands of the few.

Middle-class people responded to the great changes at work in the decades following the Civil War by pursuing a value system we might call Victorianism. In large part to distinguish themselves from the working classes and from newly arriving immigrants, Victorian Americans emphasized decorum and propriety, good manners, decency, and high standards in art and literature. Valuing hard work and self-denial, Victorians came to dominate the major means of education and communication, and thus were influential in shaping the culture at least up to the 1920s.

The first American writer to face this new America of size, conflict and diversity successfully was William Dean Howells. A thoroughly middle-class, Victorian man, Howells was later associated by culture critics with all the stuffiness and repression that the term "Victorian" suggests. But in the 1880s and 90s, Howells was deeply concerned about the fate of the American Republic which seemed to be collapsing into the European pattern of a few wealthy and the many poor individuals.

In the 1890s and early years of the new century, a group of younger writers emerged, likewise influenced by the growth of vast cities and the concentration of wealth. These "Naturalists" were, however, less hopeful than Howells about the possibilities of human freedom in such a world. Especially influenced by popularized Darwinism, the Naturalists portrayed a world in which humanity is caught in forces beyond its control.

In chapter eight, we consider the rise of middle-class reform, a movement often labelled Progressivism. From the 1890s to America's entry into World War One in 1917, a diverse reform movement sprang up at the city, state, and national level. Firmly middle-class, these Progressives sought not to substitute socialism for capitalism, but to give capitalism a human face by correcting its worst abuses. The Progressives were committed to an increased place for government in the regulation of business, and called on government to protect the "public interest."

But the Progressives were often business people themselves, and saw nothing wrong with the culture as a whole. In chapter nine, we consider an ill-formed group of (mostly) young people in the years between 1900 and 1917 who launched a "Little Renaissance" in the arts and politics. These young people ridiculed their Progressive, Victorian elders as stuffy

and repressed, and experimented with art, personal behavior, and dress, and supported much more radical political causes than their parents could ever do.

Although the spirit of the “Little Renaissance” continued on into the decade of the 1920s, its particular forms of expression in politics and the arts came to an abrupt halt in 1917 when the U.S. entered the Great War on the side of the Allies. In Part Four, chapter one, we look at the domestic impact of the war, focusing on the repressive nature of government during this period. The government’s anti-radical, pro-business stance spilled over into the postwar years, but the 1920s, as we see in chapter two, was also marked by a great flowering of the arts. The decade saw the emergence of such famous writers as F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, *e.e. cummings*, John Dos Passos, and, in 1929, William Faulkner.

Our theme throughout this book will be the connections between the work of imaginative writers and the larger culture’s discourses at any given time. This connection is particularly strong during the 1930s, when many writers became highly politicized. Many influential writers were attracted to left-wing politics, because socialism and communism seemed to offer both analyses of why America and the rest of the western world was suffering from such great economic disaster and depression, and also a solution to the problem. Many joined the Communist Party, and many more were sympathetic to its aims. But by the mid-1930s, the romance of the Party had faded, and American writers were put to work by the federal government in various projects. These projects coincided with a new interest many writers had in rediscovering “American” themes, exploring folklore, local history, and local geography.

In the 1940s, the United States and the rest of the world

was engaged in an enormous world war, the second in the twentieth century. Americans thought of themselves as the defenders of civilization and decency against the brutal fascist enemy, and this language permeated the news, movies, radio, and print. While Germany, Italy, and Japan certainly did represent a terrible threat to humanity, Americans conveniently ignored the fact that they too practiced forms of racial discrimination. The bias and violence against blacks was a national disgrace, and during the war the government herded thousands of Japanese-Americans into detention centers on the west Coast and in Colorado, charging that they were disloyal and potentially subversive. No such round-up of German-Americans or Italian-Americans took place, suggesting the racial overtones of this policy.

None of this is to deny the fact that the United States and its allies were engaged in a world-wide struggle against fascism. When the war ended, the United States found itself at the pinnacle of world power and prestige; 1945 was its moment of supreme triumph. Europe and Asia had been devastated by war; the U.S., together with other countries in the western hemisphere, was largely untouched. In fact, the war had brought the nation out of the Great Depression and had launched it on the road to industrial prosperity.

In Part Five we deal with the post-World War Two era, first by addressing the period known as the Cold War which encompassed the late-forties and early-fifties. The next American fear was that of global communism which emerged from the Soviet Union—the new rival. In an atmosphere of fear and suspicion encouraged (but not created) by Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy, Americans saw dissent and conformity as signs of treason or at least of being “soft on communism.”

In this climate, the vast majority of citizens readily acquiesced in the creation of a vast arsenal of nuclear weapons.

In chapter two, we consider the ways in which this climate of repression was challenged, beginning in the mid-1950s, with the advent of the Civil Rights Movement. Although American blacks had organized various movements to improve their status, like the Niagara Movement and the NAACP in 1909 and the United Negro Improvement Association in the 1920s, World War Two had brought even more sweeping changes to the race situation. American blacks had fought for democracy around the world, but now had to return to a segregated nation. A newly invigorated NAACP brought suit against segregated education in the famous Supreme Court case *Brown versus Board of Education*, in 1954. The court's decision that school segregation was unconstitutional was followed by stiffened resistance to change from white Southerners, but now the pace of change began to quicken. This chapter details those changes.

The Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement which followed it in the late 1960s suggest the ways in which hitherto unheard voices began to be raised in the post war years. A culture based on white, Anglo-Saxon, male values and behavior began to undergo deep change, and move toward a more genuine pluralism. In the 1960s this tendency became marked. The War in Vietnam showed up this absence of cultural unity most remarkably, with some Americans seeing the war as a needed one, defending an ally against the dangers of an aggressive communist enemy, and other Americans seeing it as an imperialist and racist war.

Arguments over the war and over the race issue were not the only signs of deep division in the U.S. in the 1960s and early 70s. Chapter four discusses the rise of the "counterculture,"

a term used to describe the alternative values and behavior embraced by many American youth and their adult allies. Popular music (or "rock music"), the widespread use of drugs, the popularity of communes and eastern religions, all pointed to an intense distrust of western-style rationality and a new openness to alternative behavior and insights. Then, too, other groups who perceived themselves as oppressed or marginalized in American society began to press for greater freedom and recognition: homosexuals, women, handicapped people, and native Americans.

Finally, we consider the ways in which intellectual change has kept pace with the increased pluralism and diversity of American life. In the 1970s and 80s, new ideas from France, like structuralism, post-structuralism, and post-modernism began to become popular and fashionable among American intellectuals. These ideas, while greatly different in themselves, share a common element; their advocates deny that there is an independently existing world separate from the ways our languages "construct" that world, a world preexisting our expression of that world. This attitude, I believe, reflects an exhaustion with social change, a willingness to give over the "real" world to politicians and industrialists in preference for a realm of signs and symbols.

Contents

<i>Foreword</i>	i
<i>Preface</i>	iii
Introduction	1

PART ONE: The Language and Experience of Colonization17

CHAPTER ONE: The Power of Puritanism: Winthrop, Bradford, Bradstreet, Taylor, Rowlandson	17
CHAPTER TWO: The Settlement of Virginia	47
CHAPTER THREE: Regionalism and Liberalism in the Eighteenth Century	53
CHAPTER FOUR: The Great Awakening	70
CHAPTER FIVE: Revolution and Nation-Building: Rhetorics in Conflict	83

PART TWO: A New Nation and a National Literature99

CHAPTER ONE: Throwing off the English Influence	99
CHAPTER TWO: The New Nation Awakens	115

CHAPTER THREE: An American Renaissance: Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, Poe, Dickinson...	126
--	-----

PART THREE: Sectionalism, War, and Recovery	165
---	-----

CHAPTER ONE: Antislavery and Abolition	165
CHAPTER TWO: Lincoln and the Myth of the "Good War"	174
CHAPTER THREE: Expansion and Transformation	183
CHAPTER FOUR: Darwinism and Social Darwinism	191
CHAPTER FIVE: The Working Class	200
CHAPTER SIX: Victorianism	203
CHAPTER SEVEN: Realism and Naturalism	210
CHAPTER EIGHT: Progressivism	219
CHAPTER NINE: The Little Renaissance.....	227

PART FOUR: The Nation Enters the Twentieth Century.....	235
---	-----

CHAPTER ONE: World War One and Its Aftermath ...	235
CHAPTER TWO: Literature and Culture in the 1920s ...	242
CHAPTER THREE: The Great Depression and Its Effects	253
CHAPTER FOUR: America in World War Two	260

PART FIVE: Postwar America.....	265
---------------------------------	-----

CHAPTER ONE: The Cold War and the Language of	
---	--

Loyalty	265
CHAPTER TWO: The Civil Rights Movement.....	275
CHAPTER THREE: The War in Vietnam and the War at Home.....	281
CHAPTER FOUR: Culture and Counterculture in the 1960s	289
CHAPTER FIVE: Literature and Culture in the 1980s...	298
NOTES	305