

The
Harper
American
Literature

Volume 1

Part One

The Harper American Literature

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▶ Donald McQuade
University of California, Berkeley
General Editor

▶ Robert Atwan
Seton Hall University

▶ Martha Banta
University of California at Los Angeles

▶ Justin Kaplan

▶ David Minter
Emory University

▶ Cecelia Tichi
Boston University

▶ Helen Vendler
Harvard University



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Sponsoring Editor
Phillip Leininger

Coordinating Editor
Jonathan Haber

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Nat LaMar

Project Editor
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Karen Salsgiver

Text Art
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Preface

The Harper American Literature reaffirms and invigorates what is now a nearly 150-year-old tradition of multivolume collections of American literature. From the publication in 1855 of Evert A. and George L. Duyckinck's two-volume *Cyclopaedia of American Literature*, readers wanting to explore what the Duyckincks called "the literary biography of America" have had ready access to what each succeeding generation judged the literature most worthy of its collective attention. But *The Harper American Literature* realizes for the first time a goal announced in the Duyckinck's preface and subsequently endorsed by the editors of virtually every collection of American literature—"to bring together in one book convenient for perusal and reference . . . memorials and records of the writers of the country and their works, from the earliest period to the present day." What distinguishes *The Harper American Literature* from its predecessors is its commitment to presenting fully the richness of American literature, its thematic and stylistic range as well as its geographical and ethnic diversity. To this end, we have worked to extend the conventional boundaries of the American literary tradition.

Virtually all collections of American literature now in print begin either with a generous selection of Puritan writings or, in fewer instances, with Captain John Smith and his engaging account of the early years of the Virginia colony. Yet such beginnings ignore a great deal of compelling literature written in and about America long before the first settlements at either Roanoke Island or Plymouth Plantation—from Cabeza de Vaca's harrowing sixteenth century narrative of his struggles to survive along the southeast coast of what is now Texas to the compelling creation myths of Native Americans. To supplant the narrow, northeastern, Puritan bias of currently available texts, we begin with a wealth of presettlement writing. "The Literature of the New World, 1492-1620," maps out new approaches to the important cultural forces that have helped shape American life.

The Harper American Literature extends America's literary tradition in another significant direction. Its final section, "The Literature of Contemporary America, 1973-Present," gives unprecedented attention to our most recent—and eloquent—

writers of fiction, poetry, and drama, far beyond the mid-1960s boundaries set by editors of nearly all other collections. Sampling the work of such important contemporary writers of fiction as Raymond Carver and Bobbie Ann Mason, poets Louise Glück and Robert Pinsky, and playwright David Mamet—to name but a few of these many fresh and already celebrated voices—will enable readers to explore unexpected dimensions of American literature.

These unique sections, “The Literature of the New World” and “The Literature of Contemporary America,” enlarge our presentation of the American literary scene. The earliest of our texts dates from 1492, the latest from 1986. We also reprint important but neglected works by classic writers, as well as important works by such neglected writers as Abigail Adams and Harriet Beecher Stowe. Throughout *The Harper American Literature*, the seven contributing editors aim to present the most comprehensive regathering and reassessment ever of America’s literary tradition, including but extending beyond classic works. For example, we reprint as a separately bound supplement the centennial edition of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, with a reconsideration of the novel’s significance by the distinguished critic Hamlin Hill. At the same time, we include extensive portions of Twain’s *Roughing It* as well as several of his tales, essays, and letters. Along with the most familiar sections of Washington Irving’s *Sketch Book*, we include a representative chapter from his *History of the Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus*, a rarely reprinted work that underscores both the continuity of American literature and the fascination of early nineteenth-century American writers with their distant past. To highlight the dramatic changes in Walt Whitman’s poetic vision and accomplishments, we end our first volume with the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, reprinted in its entirety, and begin Volume Two with generous selections from the 1891 “Deathbed Edition” of his poems. Later in Volume Two, we give unprecedented attention to Gertrude Stein’s role in the emergence of American modernism. By offering fresh perspectives on the work of America’s literary masters, we provide evidence of the ways in which American literature helped shape, and in turn was influenced by, American culture during each period in its history. Throughout, we have taken special care to provide readers with ready access to unexpected and inviting selections without overburdening overcrowded reading schedules. We hope that inquisitive readers will be prompted to explore further the works, careers, and interconnections that give American literature its inexhaustible richness.

Committed to offering a broader range in the characteristic modes of America’s most prominent literary figures, we established the following criteria to guide us in presenting the work of each writer: the literary merits of a particular selection, its significance in American literary history, its reflection of the range and depth of the writer’s accomplishments, its connections to other themes and styles, and its power to document the literary values of the cultural context within which the writer works. Most often, we represent American writers by their most important work and by a sampling of other literary performances that show them engaging significant cultural issues.

A perennial problem of any collection of American literature is a structure that appears to isolate careers and periods without adequate attention to the interactions of these lives, works, and times. *The Harper American Literature*

represents a concerted effort to weave selections, footnotes, author headnotes, and period introductions into a unified approach to American literature and the culture that informs it. In these two volumes, we seek not only to celebrate the classics of American literature and to locate neglected works of special literary merit, but also to suggest the many ways in which these works are enmeshed in a particular social and cultural context. We have designed the eleven period introductions to *The Harper American Literature* to show how major American writers were shaped by, how they were influential in, how they were responsive to their times—to offer a memorable view of the cultural immediacy of a period, what Gertrude Stein calls “the continuous present.”

Each introduction focuses on the prevailing circumstances and competitions American writers faced in each period. What was it like for writers to work at different moments in American cultural history? Were writers peripheral or central figures in examining the major issues and crises of their eras? What major developments occurred in the related arts? What was the taste of the reading public in each period? What, more generally, was the state of language, literacy, and public discourse? The answers to these and similar questions create vivid images of what it was like for writers to live and work in their times.

Each period introduction highlights relevant American literary issues, cultural materials, and personalities. Brief “boxed inserts” include (but are not restricted to) selections from writers who otherwise may not warrant full representation, as well as literary and cultural documents. These literary and folk pieces, philosophical and historical statements, and illustrations add texture to the introductions. A short list of suggested further reading, arranged chronologically, follows each introduction.

A brief informative essay introduces each writer represented in *The Harper American Literature*. These headnote essays provide biographical details and the specific literary context for each writer’s work. One major purpose of these headnotes is to show writers writing. In them, we trace the shape of an author’s career and address the question of that writer’s place in American literary history. We also consider how each writer feeds on, recoils from, or is in conflict with a particular literary, social, political, or cultural environment. At once biographical, contextual, and analytical, these essays counter the tendency to view writers in isolation from one another—by placing their contributions in the context of the main thematic and stylistic traditions of American literature. We designed the headnote essays to be informative enough to free our readers from the need to surround themselves with additional secondary sources before they read, but suggestions for further reading assist those who want to explore further the life and work of a particular author.

The Harper American Literature reprints virtually every recognized American literary classic. Yet we want these classics to reflect more than an attenuated literary tradition, one too often dismissed as elitist. We believe that America’s literary classics can—and should—exemplify what the scholar Nathan Huggins calls a “pluralistic realism.” No collection of American literature can be complete unless it includes a wide range of distinctive voices, including those of women, blacks, Asian-Americans, Mexican-Americans, and Native Americans. In our selections, headnote essays, and section introductions, we blend these works of literary and

cultural merit with other, more traditional, selections so that these new voices can be heard as more than simply statistical responses or intellectual concessions to contemporary propriety.

The Harper American Literature broadens the restrictive notion of what constitutes an American classic. We include, for example, a representative selection of Native American oral and written literatures, stretching from the oral poetry of the sixteenth century to the fiction of such contemporary writers as N. Scott Momaday and Leslie Silko. In doing so, we seek to show how celebrated and less-heralded works of literature illumine each other and enable us to appreciate the diverse achievements that have shaped a distinctively American culture. For "major" and "minor" figures alike, our consistent editorial aim has been to preserve the writer's living complexity, his or her verbal struggles with the challenges of shaping a self, modifying a genre, extending a literary tradition, or enriching a cultural context—as these are reflected in individual acts of composition.

The Harper American Literature follows a simple chronological organization, established by the author's date of birth yet remaining responsive to such instructional clusters as "The Fiction of the Early Republic." We set no guidelines for the length of our selections, which vary from short poems to full-length novels (*The Scarlet Letter* and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*) and novellas—including Melville's *Benito Cereno* and *Billy Budd*, Henry James's *Daisy Miller* and *The Turn of the Screw*, Edith Wharton's *Summer*, Gertrude Stein's *The Gentle Lena*, and Saul Bellow's *Seize the Day*—as well as such extended works of nonfiction as Thoreau's *Walden*. We avoid excerpting whenever possible, but when a writer's most important work is principally in extended prose forms, we reprint self-contained chapters or passages. James Fenimore Cooper, for example, is represented by a chapter from each of *The Leather-Stocking Tales*, featuring the life and death of Natty Bumppo. Other selections, as in the case of Nabokov's *Lolita*, are justified by its author's having previously supervised publication of the material in an abbreviated format. Several authors, including Max Apple, Harold Brodkey, David Mamet, and Robert Stone, offered recommendations on which of their works to include.

We have taken great care to provide reliable and readable texts, editing or modernizing only as needed (principally in spelling and punctuation). We have aimed to maintain the flavor of the original while making it accessible to contemporary readers. We note special textual problems and give the date of first publication at the end of each selection, preceded by the date of composition, if known. Footnotes, which are kept to a judicious minimum, explain obscure references, biblical and classical allusions, foreign words, and phrases having special or archaic meanings. We avoid interpretive footnotes. We have tried in every way possible to create conditions for reading that will enable students to discover and develop the integrity of their own responses with the support of their instructors.

We present *The Harper American Literature* as the most comprehensive collection ever assembled for the purpose of understanding—and reconstructing—American literary history. But we also intend it to be a flexible instructional resource. Because it contains virtually all the primary and supporting material

required for instructional use and leisurely reading, *The Harper American Literature* enables instructors and students to concentrate on the literary merits of major American writing. Readers will find in these pages new forms, subjects, themes, and styles—each the product of a distinctive American literary imagination.

Projects with the scope and complexity of *The Harper American Literature* are by interest and necessity collaborative intellectual enterprises. The seven contributing editors of this project met for extended periods to plan the project—to articulate the principles and procedures that would guide its development, decide on the features that would distinguish it from its predecessors, and agree on the authors and selections to be included. Within this collaborative context, several of the editors made selections and wrote headnote essays for writers in periods outside their areas of primary responsibility. And while the eleven period introductions are unified by common principles and purposes, each essay in *The Harper American Literature* remains an extended individual critical statement summarizing the literary and cultural distinctiveness of each period in American literary history. Robert Atwan is the author of the introduction to "The Literature of the New World, 1492–1620"; Cecelia Tichi of "The Literature of Colonial America, 1620–1776"; Donald McQuade of "The Literature of the New Republic, 1776–1836"; and Justin Kaplan of "The Literature of the American Renaissance, 1836–1865." For "The Literature of an Expanding Nation, 1865–1912," Justin Kaplan treated the decade following the Civil War, Martha Banta the next thirty years. David Minter wrote the introductions to "The Literature of Modernism: Prose, 1912–1940"; "The Literature of Post-War America: Prose, 1940–1973"; and "The Literature of Contemporary America: Prose, 1973–Present." Helen Vendler is the author of the introductions to "The Literature of Modernism: Poetry, 1912–1940"; "The Literature of Post-War America: Poetry, 1940–1973"; and "The Literature of Contemporary America: Poetry, 1973–Present."

Donald McQuade,
General Editor

Acknowledgments

The publication of *The Harper American Literature* represents the collaborative efforts of numerous professionals. In many ways its final shape challenges the accuracy of a century-old American adage, first recorded in Henry Ward Beecher's *Proverbs from Plymouth Pulpit* (1887): "It is not the going out of port, but the coming in, that determines the success of a voyage." As *The Harper American Literature* comes to completion, its seven contributing editors would like to acknowledge those who contributed to this ambitious undertaking at both ends.

The Harper American Literature could not have been launched without the intelligence and vision of John J. McDermott, Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at Texas A & M University, who helped articulate the need for a

substantially different collection of American writing. His generous advice and rich understanding of American culture have proven invaluable throughout the project's development. Helene Brewer, Queens College, CUNY, served as a limitless resource during the early phases of shaping this collection. John Frederick Nims, University of Illinois at Chicago Circle, and Joseph F. Trimmer, Ball State University, made significant contributions to the project's development, especially during the first several rounds of extended conversations about its distinctive features. We are grateful for their continued support.

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We trust that all those who contributed to putting *The Harper American Literature* in print will endorse Ralph Waldo Emerson's notion that "the reward of a thing well done is to have it done."

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