

HIGHLIGHTS OF AMERICAN LITERATURE

美国文学选读

孙华祥●主编

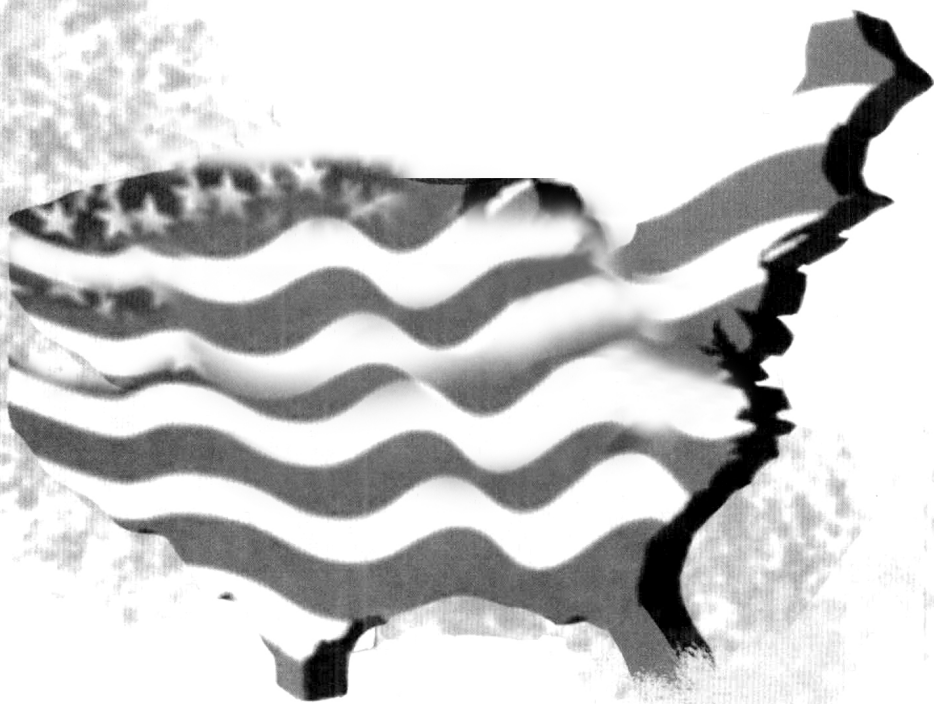


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前 言

目前，国内出版的普通高等学校英语专业使用的美国文学教材已有十几种。这些教材无一例外的都是为一个学年的教学时数编写，且各有所长。有的教材注重了文学史与文学选读的结合，有的则是单纯的文学史或者文学作品选读；有的教材对选篇进行了导读，也有的对选篇添加了注释；有的教材用纯英文写成，也有的用汉语对作家或作品进行了解释说明。因此，目前国内的美国文学教材市场上一时难以找到一套能同时满足以下所有条件的美国文学教材：专门为普通高等学校英语专业高年级学生编写，文学史与文学选读相结合而并重，教材正文全部用英语编写，对选篇同时进行导读、注释并提供思考题，编选的内容适合一个学期的教学时数使用。正是在此情形下，这部《美国文学选读》应运而生。

这套《美国文学选读》的特点之一就是她打破了美国文学教材编写的传统框架，选材直接从美国浪漫主义文学开始，经过现实主义文学和现代主义文学，一直延伸到后现代主义文学。其间撷取了美国文学史上最具代表性的18位作家及其经典作品，供普通高等学校英语专业高年级一个学期的教学使用。在此框架下，教材开篇所编选的作家作品已经脱离了对英国文学的模仿，代表着真正意义上的美国文学；结篇则表现了美国文学中最新的文学思潮。

《美国文学选读》的另一个特点是追求文学史概述与文学作品选读的结合，提高文学史部分的内容在文学选读课程中的重要性。从篇章结构上讲，教材的每一章都大致分为两个部分。首先是该时期文学史的总体概述，然后是作家的作品选读。这么做的目的就是试图通过文学史部分的概述，为读者阅读、理解和欣赏选篇提供所必需的背景信息，使得读者能够在相应的文学背景下更好地获得文学体验和美学感受。

这套《美国文学选读》还有一个特点就是为选篇提供了导读、注释和课后讨论题。导读部分力求有的放矢，注释部分力求准确详尽，课后讨论题则力求针对性与开放性共存。这样做的目的是为了培养学生自主学习的能力，并深化读者对美国文学的认识。

编者自 2006 年开始酝酿编写新的美国文学史及选读教材，前后历经诸多曲折。现在教材得以出版，应首先感谢曲阜师范大学外国语学院的王福祥副院长。王副院长自始至终对这部教材的编写工作给予密切的关注、充分的肯定、热情的鼓励和有力的支持。编者从中得到了编写工作所必需的勇气、信心和动力。

特别需要感谢的是中国社会科学出版社的编辑高涵女士。在此教材的编写、出版过程中，从高屋建瓴的指导性意见，到细致入微的编辑工作，高女士从不吝惜自己的汗水。教材的字里行间处处渗透着高女士的心血，她渊博的学识和一丝不苟的工作态度令人钦佩。

这套《美国文学选读》教材由孙华祥主持编写。参加编写工作的有（按姓名拼音顺序排列）：曹英慧、高丽、孙华祥、孙明瑞、肖冠华、许红艳和张琳。

编者

2010 年 3 月

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Chapter 01 American Romanticism

The American Romantic Period, the genuine outset of distinctive American literature, spanned from the end of the 18th century to the outbreak of the Civil War. The American writings before the period were greatly influenced by the European writings, imitative and lacking of typically American identity. Nevertheless, with the entrance to the Romantic Period, American literature began to own its distinguishable features.

The development of the young United States nurtured its literature. After achieving independence with the *Treaty of Paris* (1783), America expanded westward, enlarging its borders seven times. At the same time, the nation experienced the transformation from an agricultural country into an industrial one. In the 1820s, railroad had been built and the total length of the domestic railroad amounted to 30,000 miles in 1860. Besides, the shipping transportation increased several-fold. Cities flourished and the urban population grew drastically. Economically, America had never been wealthier. Politically, having thrown off a colonial government, the young Republic was ripe and encouraging. The pursuit of democracy and equality, inspired through American Revolution and Enlightenment Movement, became the persistent goal of American people. As a result, Americans urged to have their own voices both at home and abroad. Moreover, the boom of newspapers, magazines and books really gave impetus to the flowering of literature.

American romanticism shared many features with British, such as the emphasis on spontaneous feelings, a strong preference for the supernatural and an insistent appeal to the return of nature. However, American romanticism gradually grew from the providential visions of Puritanism, the wilderness of this continent, and the untiring quest for freedom and equality. In these circumstances, American romantic writings bore something dissimilar from British. First, Puritanism exerted a great impact on the American way of perception and moral values. Correspondingly, American romantic writers tended more to moralize than their

English contemporaries. Second, the “newness” of the American experiences provided refreshing writing materials for romanticists. For instance, the westward expansion involved the confrontation of aboriginal Indians and the adventures of energetic frontiers. Based on these unusual historical surroundings, American romantic writings glittered with the sparks of charm and originality. Finally, Americans’ earnest appeal to equality and democracy made the power of individuality enhanced. Therefore, the American romantic writers tried self-consciously to be new and independent, free from imitation of the alien literature. Thus, individuality was conspicuously highlighted in the American romantic writings.

The budding of American Romanticism should be traced back to Washington Irving (1783—1859), one of the first American writers. It was Irving that first made American literature widely acknowledged in the “Old World”. His masterpiece *The Sketch Book* (1819—1820), with each story enveloped in the romantic or legendary hue, marked the initiation of American romantic period and set a model for American short stories. Among his stories, “Rip Van Winkle” and “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” attained permanent reputation.

James Fenimore Cooper (1789—1851) was the first American border writer. He brought out a noble frontiersman in “Leather-stocking Tales”, a series of five novels—*The Pioneers* (1823), *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), *The Prairie* (1827), *The Pathfinder* (1840), and *The Deerslayer* (1841). The frontiersman, named Leatherstocking or Natty Bumppo, shaped an archetype of American rebels, who opposed the civilized society and returned to nature for spiritual loftiness.

Although the pioneering romantic writers had achieved some literary pinnacle, their attainment could not be competed against that of European romanticists until the spiritual storm of Transcendentalism. New England Transcendentalism evolved from the thoughts of the members of the Transcendental Club, an informal club in New England in the 1830s. It began as a radical religious movement, counteracting the rationalists and the conservative institutions. Transcendentalists advocated man’s capacity of transcending the reach of human senses to acquire knowledge intuitively. The “over-soul” was the essence of Transcendentalism. It was believed to be an all-pervading power for goodness, from which all things came and of which all were a part. The nature was emblematic of the “over-soul” and

man was able to communicate with God without intercessors. Transcendentalists also emphasized the significance of the individual; they asserted an ideal individual should be self-reliant and get far away from the luxury of the material life.

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803—1882) was the most eminent leader of Transcendentalism. *Nature* (1836), his literary elite, was honored as “the Bible of New England Transcendentalism”. Emerson was truly the center of the American Transcendental Movement and he exerted an immense impact on American literature. He firmly believed there was a force at work to elevate the individual to further improvement, which embodied the optimistic spirit of the rising country. His perception of humanity and nature as a symbol of universal truth encouraged the development of the Symbolist Movement in American literature.

Henry David Thoreau (1817—1862), the faithful disciple of Transcendentalism, celebrated the richness of life in nature through a two-year sojourn in a cabin by Walden Pond. He recorded his own life experience in a book entitled *Walden* (1854), in order to call on people to eliminate unnecessary material luxuries and seek for mental tranquility from nature.

Stimulated by New England Transcendentalism, American literature reached its full vitality in every genre; the writings erased the mark of imitation and stepped into entire independence. This flourishing period (1830—1860) was called “American Renaissance”. During the American Renaissance period, many great literary giants appeared on the stage of American literature.

Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804—1864), imbued with rich imagination, remained one of the ambivalent writers in American literature. Strongly influenced by his family history, he harbored a conception that man was born of sin and the intrinsic sin would be present throughout the whole life of man, even passing down to the next generation. *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), one of his distinguished stories, showed an awful family curse in which the living generation of the family was unmercifully chastised for the misdeed of their ancestors. His masterpiece *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) employed the form of allegory, shedding light on sinners, their psychological conflict and their moral atonement. Hawthorne was adept at combining realistic details with fanciful things by means of symbolism and art of ambiguity.

Herman Melville (1819—1891) shared Hawthorn's idea of man's sin. Moreover, Melville declared man was doomed and had to submit to the supremacy of nature. His masterpiece *Moby-Dick* (1851) portrayed a mortal duel between man and nature at full length. The hero took his revenge on a gigantic whale which had bitten one of his legs off. His voyage was emblematic of a courageous and unalterable quest for the mystery and truth of the universe. The deadly end of the hero echoed the writer's perception that man's efforts to counterwork the power of nature were futile.

Among the American romantic writers, Edgar Allan Poe (1809—1849) was very unique. His bitter and impoverished life experience made his writings dark and gloomy. Both his poems and short stories were hunted by the shadow of death. His writing materials went beyond the reality of life, imbued with strong imagination and inexpressible calmness. He was the first American writer to herald Aestheticism and insisted on the pursuit of the "supreme beauty" by musical patterns. He was also the first American literary critic to set up the systematic theories for the creation of poetry and short story.

In the field of poetry, Walt Whitman (1819—1892) and Emily Dickinson (1830—1886) were the most significant figures. Whitman subverted the poetic conventions, innovating in both themes and poetic devices. He loved everything and everybody on his motherland and sang for the booming country ardently. Owing to exquisite observation and keen perspicacity, Whitman incorporated his enthusiasm for America in *Leaves of Grass* (1855), which created a strong sensation at the moment of publication. *Leaves of Grass* covered a broad range of subject matters, including life, death, love, friendship, body, soul and so on. In order to match the free thoughts and facilitate the outburst of emotional ebullience, Whitman used "free verse" (verses without a fixed beat or regular rhyme scheme), with long lines and short lines juxtaposed casually. Whitman, beyond doubt, brought American poetry to a new era.

Emily Dickinson was an eccentric poetess. She lived a half-reclusive life, retreating from the social communication to privacy. Dickinson created 1776 poems, but only fourteen appeared during her lifetime. She, just like Whitman, was innovative in poetic techniques. She used dashes as a musical device to produce the stress pattern and capital letters as a means of emphasis. Dickinson

felt like assuming a persona in her poems, bereft of identity and gender. Through the voice of the persona, the poetess generally addressed the conditions of human beings. Her poems mainly revolved around religion, love, nature and death. She was particularly obsessed with death and explored it from the viewpoint of a person who was in the state of being dying or dead.

In a word, the American Romanticism contributed a gallery of talented literary figures and outstanding literary fruits to American literature. The romantic period, characteristic of American newness and extol of individualism, established itself as a great literary monument.

Edgar Allan Poe

(1809—1849)

✧ Poe's life

Edgar Allan Poe's life was regarded as the most melodramatic among all of his contemporary writers. He was born in Boston, Massachusetts, on January 19, 1809. His childhood turned out to be a gloomy one. Poe's father and mother, both professional actors, died when the boy was only three years old. Then, he was adopted by John Allan, a prosperous but childless merchant. With Poe's growing up, the relationship between the foster father and son went from bad to worse.

At 17, Poe attended the University of Virginia where Poe studied hard but failed to finish. John Allan refused to proffer an adequate allowance, resulting in Poe's gambling for money. Expelled by the university, he was enrolled at West Point as a cadet in 1830. Once again, he was forced to leave because of missing classes and roll calls. Poe's deterioration was attributed to John Allan's second marriage and the new wife's pregnancy. John's would-be legitimate heir must deprive Poe of his right of inheritance.

Realizing his sterile future, Poe made a hand-to-mouth earning by working as an assistant editor or editor. He was first recommended to *Southern Literary Messenger* and then became an assistant editor of the periodical in 1835. Unluckily, he was discharged for being caught drunk by his boss. Also in 1835, Poe married Virginia, his 13-year-old cousin. After marriage, the couple went back to Richmond and Poe remained at the *Messenger* until 1837. In 1839, he worked for *Burton's Gentleman's Magazine* as an assistant editor. During this period, he published several poems, book reviews, critiques, and stories in the paper. One year later, Poe changed the job and found a position as an assistant at *Graham's Magazine*. After that, he attempted to angle for a government position, quitting *Graham's Magazine* and getting to New York to seek the opportunity. In New York, he still worked as an editor for *Broadway Journal*, which failed in 1846.

Disillusioned, Poe moved to a cottage in the section of the Bronx, New York;

Virginia died there of tuberculosis in 1847. The wife's untimely death drove Poe into crush and he addicted himself to heavy alcohol. In 1849, he died of congestion of brain, ending his short and shabby life.

❖ Poe's literary creation

Poe's mature career covers from his twenty-first year the Bronx, New York to his death. During the years, he establishes himself as a poet, a short-story writer, a literary reviewer, and an editor.

Poe not only creates many distinctive poems, but also puts forward some impressive poetic principles which are illustrated in his critical essays — “The Philosophy of Composition” (1846) and “The Poetic Principle” (1850). He advocates poetry should appeal only to the sense of beauty, not earthly experience. A poem should be short and each poem should produce only one definite emotional impression, in which the soul soars towards “supernatural beauty”. The most legitimate emotion revealed by a poet should be melancholy. Death is the right subject available for a poet to transmit the intangible sadness, while the death of a supreme beautiful lady must push the gloomy tone ahead to the summit. Poe believes music is closely associated with the mood throughout the poem. For this reason, he defines poetry as “the rhythmical creation of beauty.” In a large majority of his poems, Poe fabricates the death of beautiful women with the most charming melodies, which transcends the limit of words and passes into the realm of pure music. Lots of unforgettable poems of his, such as “The Raven” (1845) and “Annabel Lee” (1849), fit well into the poetic views mentioned above.

Poe's theories for the short story are equally extraordinary. In his opinion, the merit of a story lies in its unusual psychological effect upon the readers. The tone is set from the very beginning by the first sentence in carefully chosen words. The end of the story must reveal the truth by means of deduction and ratiocination, which attains the impression of wholeness. In order to ensure the wholeness, the story must be of such length as to be read at one sitting.

Poe's short stories are classified into two groups—horror stories and detective stories. In all his horror stories, Poe seems to fathom the breaking point of the readers' psychological endurance. His stories are flooded with neurotic freaks who are lingering on the fringe of insanity, trapped in the tangles of love and hate.