

American Literature

美国文学

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·上海·

Preface

American literature may be among the youngest national literatures in the world. Its real history, if calculating roughly from the end of the revolutionary War (October 1781), is only about two hundred years or more. Within such a short period, American literature swiftly developed, well matured, began to receive international recognition, and has exercised an impactful effect upon world literature. In fact, American writers have brought out some of the world's best literature.

During the short history of literary development of more than two hundred years which can be divided into several stages such as the colonial period, the period of enlightenment, New England transcendentalism and the romantic age, the age of realism, American naturalism, American modernism, there emerged in the American literary world two spectacular literary renaissances, which, as a result, demonstrated the brilliance of American literature and made it stand erect in the arena of world literature.

The first American renaissance began with the maturing of American literature in the 1830s and ended with its flowering in the 1850s. A considerable number of writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville and Walt Whitman fully displayed their talents. They freed themselves from the hindrance of the tradition of English literature, discolored the brand of the English literature shown in the works by the former writers, and created a great number of literary works, brilliant, really American and original in style.

Though several writers in the first renaissance occupied a unique position in the history of American literature, the literature between the two world

wars or the second renaissance surpassed the previous literature, by a great deal, in the light of the numerical superiority of the emerging brilliant writers and works, in the light of the range of life reflected, richness of themes and contents, and the originality of style.

The second renaissance which was characterized by disillusionment to the war, adopted the despairing tone of *The Waste Land* and reached its summit in 1930. That year saw the Nobel Prize for Literature was awarded to the first American writer, Sinclair Lewis who attacked provincialism in *Main Street* (1920). From this time on, American writers carried off this unusual honor one after another, such as Eugene O' Neill (1936), P. S. Buck (1938), T. S. Elliot (1948), William Faulkner (1950), Ernest Hemingway (1954), John Steinbeck (1962), etc. The increasingly important status American literature occupies in world literature can be mirrored in the awarding of the Nobel Prize.

These two renaissances made American literature flower without precedence and marked the maturity of American literature. Up to now, though thousands of literary works are published in the U. S. A. every year, only a small part of them, in reality, could stand up to the rest of time and become masterpieces. American literature, nevertheless, has already occupied an important place in world literature, and its impact allows no neglect.

Therefore this book are designed to represent a core list of the above writers and other important writers, works, and movements from colonial to contemporary, of which some knowledge is essential to all serious students of American literature. We hope to help students to appreciate and analyze, as much as possible, representative works of the important writers from the various periods of American literature, and to help them to form a deep and comprehensive understanding of that literature. Aside from being used as a textbook of American literature for English majors of the university, American Literature may benefit the broad masses of English learners, considerably, in their advanced studies.

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Part I

The Colonial Period and 17th Century Literature

Chapter 1

Discovery of America and English Settlement

In the year 1000, Europe was not prepared for the discovery of America. Numerous changes which were to take place in Europe would make it more open to such a development. Because of these changes, Columbus would be the effective discoverer of America.

First, the fall of the Roman Empire in the fifth century threw Europe into chaos, and Europe entered a period referred to as the Middle or Dark Ages. This was a period of very localized authority with no national government or kings. The main occupation was agriculture and farms were centered around small independent communities called manors. Life was usually immobile. After 1100, this society changed drastically when a commercial revolution occurred that created new classes of traders and bankers. Then trade began to develop between manors and the town that had begun to grow near the old manors, and between towns themselves. The merchants of the towns became interested in acquiring wealth. Their trading developed from their local areas to other parts of Europe and eventually to distant lands outside of bounds of Europe itself. In the 1200s, travelers such as Marco Polo traveled deep into Asia and returned with stories of the wealth of the orient. Trade in general, and with the East in particular, increased. By the end of 1200s the Italian merchants had gained a monopoly on eastern trade by controlling overland routes. By the mid-1400s many parts of Europe hoped to break the monopoly by finding a new route to the orient.

Second, the rise of national monarchies also influences the discovery

of America. By the end of the Middle Ages kings were regaining their power from the feudal lords, and nations were beginning to take shape that shared a political organization under one rule. By the 1400s France, England and Spain were ruled by ambitious kings and queen. Their ambitions to expand their powers accounted for the frequent expeditions on the unknown seas.

Third, the Renaissance and the Reformation also contributed to the discovery of America. The renaissance, an intellectual and artistic movement and a revival of learning, expanded the European citizen's self-knowledge and understanding of the surrounding world. The Europeans who formerly drank, ate, worked, and slept became curious and adventurous. Actually their curiosity was intertwined with the desire for precious metals or wealth. The Renaissance led to the invention of certain instruments which were necessary for the exploration of the area beyond the Mediterranean; among these were the compass, the astrolabe and the cross-staff.

With the successful revolt against the Catholic Church, the dominant Christian church in Europe during the Middle Ages, by a monk named Martin Luther in 1517, the Protestant Reformation began. And soon other religious revolts followed, such as those led by John Calvin and King Henry VII of England. With the single-church idea disappearing, religious persecution heightened. Even before the finding of the New World, many Protestants wished to leave Europe for a sanctuary where they could practice their new faith in peace, while many Catholics also wished for a new land where they could practice their old faith without having dissident Protestant voices to contend with. The discovery of America answered the prayers of many. In fact, Mammon and God worked hand in hand to encourage overseas explorations.

After Columbus discovered America, the Spanish and the French made further expeditions to and explorations in the New World. The English were actually the last to explore it, but they knew from the Spanish and French experience that exploration alone would not create a successful empire in the New World. Settlement and colonization were necessary.

During the reign of Queen Elizabeth (1558—1603), the English in growing numbers concluded that the New World was their best opportunity. The real reasons why the English desired to settle in that unknown and forbidding land were as follows. First the rising merchant class, overseas colonies offered vast economic opportunities. Trading companies were beginning to carry on a worldwide trade. These companies were granted a trade monopoly from the king or queen for trading in a particular region. America seemed to fit well into the plans of these merchant-capitalists, for goods could be sold to the settlers, and in return natural resources could be sold in England and Europe. The second reason was religious. Since the Reformation, there appeared intense contradictions between different religious sects. To zealous English Protestants, a colony in America would offer a bulwark against Catholic Spain and France, and to English dissenters, it would offer a bulwark against English Protestants. Again God and money went hand in hand. Thirdly, the Enclosure Movement of the 1500s also stimulated fields into sheep pastures, for sheep raising was more profitable than growing staple products. The shift led to thousands of farm workers' losing their jobs and to an increase in the urban population. The cities became overcrowded, and America, thus, would be a good place to send this excess population. Still other people wanted to settle in the New World to leave oppressive political institutions, to escape burdensome church duties, to acquire large landholdings, or merely to change their general pattern of living. Obviously, material gain was a common factor.

Jamestown was the first successful colony established by the English. Queen Elizabeth died in 1603, and King James I came to the throne. He felt that earlier colonization attempts failed because of the lack of money. So he decided to sponsor a joint stock company. As a result, the Virginia Company of London was formed, a charter was given, and in April 1607 Jamestown was founded on the lower ranches of Chesapeake Bay on a low, swampy island. Initially, the first settlers from the Virginia Company promoted the Jamestown Colony, not for religious but for mercantile

purpose. Virginia plantations would provide goods from the British trade and would provide homes and land for the British. They counted on the Indian for cheap labor. One of the dominant leaders in the early years of the colony was John Smith who was a soldier, explorer, and author. The economic foundations of Virginia were laid firmly in smoke, tobacco.

The colony of Maryland was founded in 1633. Lord Baltimore acquired a charter from King Charles I for land in northern Virginia. The first Lord Baltimore died before actual settlement; it was the second Lord Baltimore that sent Vessels Ark and Dove to found Maryland in 1633. The settlers in Maryland had envisioned the land a heaven for English Catholics who suffered persecution in England. Yet the Protestants were always in the majority, although the Catholic aristocrats frequently held the power. Maryland found immediate economic success with tobacco, but it did experience constant religious strife between Catholic and Protestant. In 1649 an Act of Toleration was passed to guarantee religious liberty for all Christians. In fact, the act was an attempt to protect Catholicism. A civil war broke out in 1650s. By 1689 Lord Baltimore had given his control over the colony to the king, and it became a Protestant stronghold.

New England Colonies. The influx of Calvinism—with its emphasis on the universal priesthood and two factions within the Anglican Church. A group of separatists, better known as Pilgrims, believed that salvation could be found only outside the officially established Church of England; another group, the Puritans, believed that salvation could be found within the Anglican Church but that the church had to be purified substantially of any traces of Roman Catholicism.

The Pilgrims were the first of the two groups to come to America. They purchased land from the Virginia Company of London to settle in the northern part of the Virginia colony, and in the fall of 1620 a group of 35 Pilgrims and 70 non-Pilgrims set out on the ship *Mayflower* for northern Virginia. However they found themselves at Cape Cod, far from their destination. Since they were now outside of any legally constituted

government, the Pilgrims drew up the famous Mayflower Compact (considered by some historians to be the first American constitution) which stated they make “just and equal laws for the general good.” These Pilgrims were the founders of the Plymouth colony.

Although the Pilgrims frequently are considered to be the spiritual ancestors of the American people, this colony was small and weak, and eventually was absorbed into the Puritan Massachusetts Bay Colony.

The Puritans, unlike the Pilgrims, came from the upper-middle class gentry of England. With much money and planning, they founded the Massachusetts Bay Company and obtained a charter from King Charles I. In 1630, they sailed from Salem, Massachusetts. They wanted so much to be independent from England that they carried their charter to ensure complete, independent self-government. By 1640, the colony numbered 20000 people. The most influential leader in the early years was John Winthrop. The Puritans came not merely to worship in their own way, but also to demonstrate that the Puritan life was the ideal way. They planned to establish a Puritan model state for the instruction of all true Christians. They were going to create a “city upon a hill”, a New Jerusalem in America based on their interpretation of the Bible. Although the strict Puritan experiment failed by the 1700s, the puritans left an indelible mark not only on Massachusetts but also on the whole of New England—particularly the native population.

The other colonies in New England were limited from the 1630s to the 1660s for England was involved in civil war and political upheavals. During the period, the Dutch established the lucrative colony of New Amsterdam, and the Swedes founded New Sweden. In 1664, the English sent four warships to New Amsterdam and the colony of New York was born, and with it East and West Jersey. Since the Dutch previously had acquired the Swedish Colony, the English takeover also included the area soon to become the Delaware colony. About this time the King of England gave a grant of land south of Virginia to eight noblemen who founded the colony of

Carolina.

The colonies of Pennsylvania and Georgia were last but hardly least. The colony is said to reflect the ideals of one person more than any other person—that person was William Penn.

The New World was not new, nor unsettled. But the European settlers brought with them the culture and the myths to which they and their descendants added. The American Dream existed long before it was actually found. The idea of a western land which was *terra incognita* first came into existence out of European writing. It was “out of stock of classical and religious tradition, out of vague historical memories and fantastic tales, an identity has already been given to the great land mass on the world’s edge which waited to be summoned into history and made part of the divine plan.” (Ruland, etc., 1992:5) Yet even then America implied far more than the *terra incognita* claimed by the Italian entrepreneur Amerigo Vespucci for the Spanish throne. Millenarian and Utopian expectations were already attached to the new land. It promised opportunities for realizing utopia, for unlimited riches and mass conversions, for the return to pastoral arcadia, for implementing schemes for moral and social perfection. The American Dream was also the Puritan view of the new world. It has particular relevance to the New England Puritans who were a community that invented seventeenth century, expanding, modifying and revising it in a procession of sermons, exhortations, and declarations, histories and hagiographies, covenants and controversies, statements and restatements of purpose—a stream of rhetorical self-definition. So, the discovery of America was not only a secular venture, a process of exploration and appropriation empowered by what scholars have come to call the forces of modernization: capitalist enterprise state nationalism, the expansion of Western European forms of society and culture throughout the world, but also a process of discovery of a second Eden of establishing the identity of the New England Puritans, and of identifying American dream.