

American Literature: Beginnings to Civil War

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Navajo rug – a symbolic pattern using number 4 – balance, stasis, and 3 – imbalance, momentum



Forced removal of the Cherokee nation to Oklahoma (1838)



Ishmael trying to smoke Queequeg's pipe in *Moby Dick* (2010), a successful opera adaptation of Herman Melville's novel (1851) by Jake Heggie.

Course Schedule: Beginnings – Civil War

1. 1 October

Introductory: Historical Influences and Distinctive Features, Periodization of American Literature

2. 8 October

Earliest Monuments of American Literature

3. 15 October

The Shaping of the Puritan Self

4. 22 October

The Eighteenth-Century: The Great Awakening and the Enlightenment

5. 29 October

Revolution and the Early Republic

6. 5 November

Inventing the Indians: Bryant, Cooper, Simms, and Longfellow

7. 12 November

American Gothic: Brockden Brown and Poe

8. 26 November

American Transcendentalism: Emerson and Thoreau

9. 3 December

Late Romanticism: Hawthorne and Melville

10. 10 December

11. 17 December

The Birth of Modern Poetry: Whitman and Dickinson - Whitman

12. 7 January 2026

The Birth of Modern Poetry: Whitman and Dickinson – Dickinson

Course Schedule:

American Literature: Civil War-WW1

13.

Mark Twain and Tall Tale

14.

Fictions of Realism – W.D. Howells, Henry James

15.

Naturalism

16.

Abolitionism and Beginnings of African American Literature

17.

American Women Literature – Beginnings to WW1

When did American Literature Begin?

1. “Decolonizing View”

American literature starts with the development of **the oral culture of the Native Americans**, which originated in the pre-historic past. The **influence of advanced Mesoamerican civilizations** (the Mayas, Aztecs...) on the tribes in the Southwest and the Mississippi valley, and **the transfer of traditions from old nations** (Anasazi, Hohokam...) to the modern ones (Navajo, Pima...).

Problems:

- **Difficult to teach** in American literature programmes, since most teachers do not have adequate training in cultural anthropology, ethnology and Native American studies.
- **Scarcity of written records** of Native American narratives:
 - **Pima** (Akimel O’odham, “River People” in Southern Arizona) their **myth of creation** was recorded in **1694** by Juan Manje, a Spanish missionary, and, again in **1775**, by Pedro Font.
 - **Iroquois** mythology - ***Sketches of Ancient History of the Six Nations (1827)*** by **David Cusick**, a Tuscarora painter and physician.
 - Some of the records were **forgeries**: **Walam Olum** (The Red Score) was invented by a French naturalist Constantine Rafinesque



From David Cusick’s *Sketches of Ancient History of the Six Nations*: Stony Giants and Indian warriors. An engraving by the author.

When did American Literature Begin?

2. “Traditional View”

The arrival of the colonizers

or, euphemistically, “the settlers” at the end of the 16th century (the 1580s).

The first English colony: **Virginia** (according to the “Virgin Queen”— Elizabeth I).

The first **colonial wars**:

- **Pequot War (1636-37)** - genocide of an Indian tribe in Massachusetts and Connecticut by Puritan colonists. Commemorated by the name of the whaling ship – the “Pequod” - in Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* (1851).
- **King Philip Wars (1675-78)** – a large-scale conflict of New England colonists with Native Americans (the view of the colonizers mediated by “Indian Captivity Narratives”).

Brotherton Indian Reservation (1758) in New Jersey – the first Native American reservation. **The first government scheme of reservations: 1764.** By **1887** most Native Americans were forced to relocate to reservations and their lands were sold to the colonizers: 1876, a “**starve or sell**” **treaty** signed by only 10% of the 75% tribal men. The 1870s: Gold Rush in the Black Hills, the Lakota (Sioux) nation robbed of their sacred lands.



Pequot War

Why “American” and Not “the U.S.” Literature

- **American Exceptionalism:**

The Puritans believed that they were “**the elect people of God**” like the Jews in the Old Testament led by Moses to the Promised Land.

- **American Revolution (1776-87):**

Religious exceptionalism became secularized as **the ideology of the new republic** (America will become an earthly paradise, an endpoint of human history).

- **Monroe Doctrine (1823):**

Called after President James Monroe (1817-25) and directed against Spanish and Portuguese colonization in the Americas: “**the American continents, by the free and independent condition which they have assumed and maintain, are henceforth not to be considered as subjects for future colonization** by any European powers.” **The U.S. position** in this process: “**The Big Brother**” of other American nations (1880s-90s). **Global M.D.** (Woodrow Wilson; end of WW1), U.S. supremacy over the whole world. Donald Trump: “**MAGA**”

“We shall find that **the God of Israel is among us**, when ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies; when **He shall make us a praise and glory** that men shall say of succeeding plantations, ‘may the Lord make it like that of New England.’ For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. **The eyes of all people are upon us.**”

John Winthrop: “A Model of Christian Charity” (1630)
A sermon of the first Puritan governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony (roughly the area of today’s Boston) delivered before reaching American shores.



John Winthrop

James Monroe

Woodrow Wilson

Identity of “American Literature”?

- **English language? – No**

The literature includes texts in a number of languages of the emigrants, including Spanish, Chinese, Yiddish, Hebrew, German, Arabic, Norwegian, Swedish, Danish and other languages.

- **American Tradition? – No**

The attempts to trace a consistent American tradition end in the 1960s (Leon Howard, *Literature and the American Tradition*, 1960).

Post-modernism stresses the **hybrid nature** of American culture: “**the salad bowl**” instead of “**melting pot.**”

- **Modernism + Technology? – No**

This assumption was published by Malcolm Bradbury and Richard Ruland in their literary history *From Puritanism to Postmodernism* (1991). **Many discourses in American literature cannot be described as Modernist.** Especially those in **ethnic literatures**: Latino, Native American, Yiddish. **Modernism is treated critically** by a number of post-modernists: Kurt Vonnegut, Thomas Pynchon, etc.

- **Multiculturalism, Transculturalism? – Yes**

Sacvan Bercovitch: preface to *Cambridge History of American Literature* (1994-2004): American literature is a set of “**meanings and possibilities generated by competing ideologies, shifting realities and the confrontation of cultures**”.

These approaches establish **cultural pluralism, intercultural communication and democratic debate** as the dynamic nature of the American literature, which develops **beyond traditional notions of identity.**



the melting pot



the salad bowl

Main Features of American Literature

Earliest Stage (late 16th – early 17th c.)

1. Alien Reality of the New World

18th – 20th century

2. “The Frontier”

Beginnings – 20th century

3. Religious Dissent

4. Polycentrism

20th century – present

5. Multiculturalism and Ethnicity



1. Alien Reality of the New World

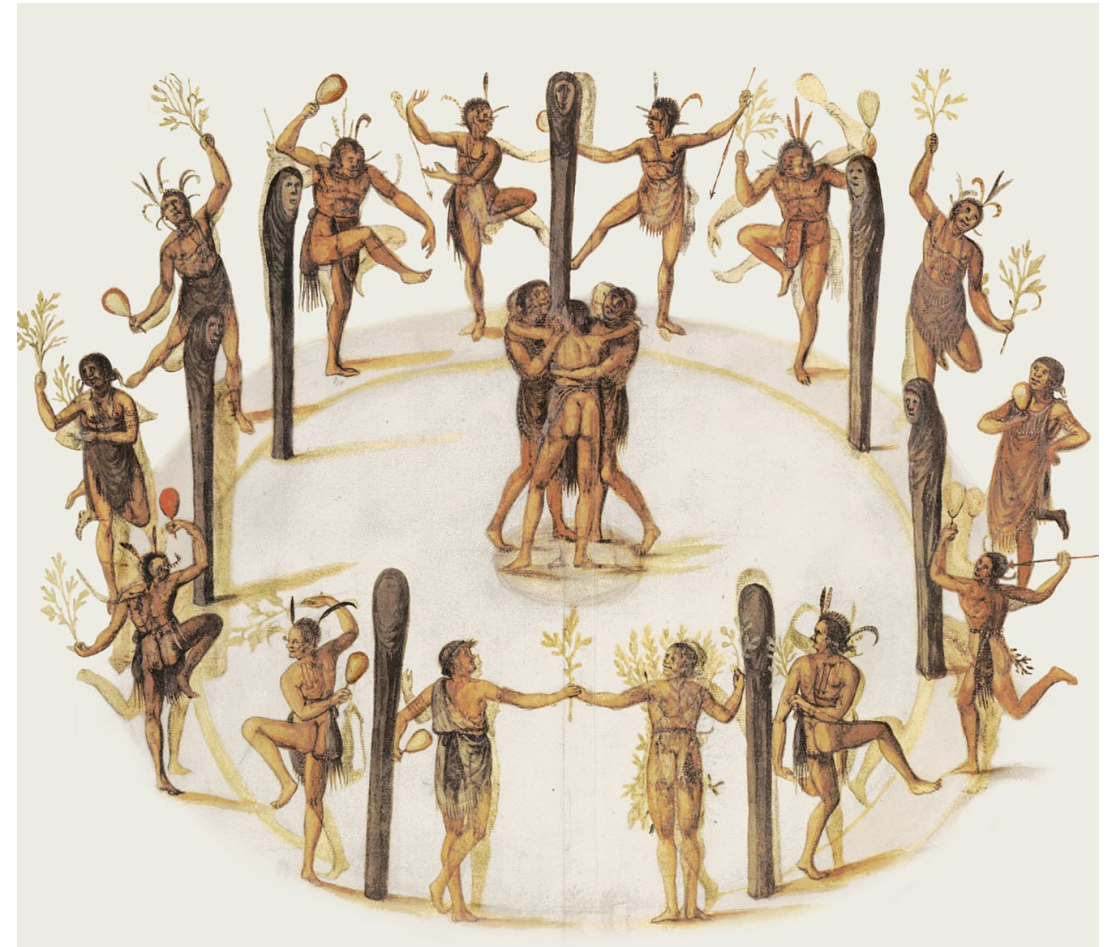
Ambiguity:

- **Idealization** – the New World described as the “**New Canaan**” - referring to the promised land of the Jews (Old Testament, Exodus). **John White** idealized the Indians in his drawings (bodies drawn according to Greek statues). Emphasis on the richness of natural resources, fertility of soil, exotic plants...
- **Demonization** – Native Americans seen as devils, emphasis on the hostility of Indians, severity of climate, famine and diseases.

Importance:

American and Canadian culture and society are traditionally seen as

- **framed by the natural environment** (importance of survival in nature)
- and sometimes (e.g., the *Declaration of Independence*, R.W. Emerson's philosophy) **identified with nature**, in contrast to corrupt “feudal” Europe.



John White, *Dancing Secotan Indians* (1585)

2. “The Frontier”

A territory (never a line) of **the encounter between nature and civilization** allegedly ending in the triumph of the latter over the former.

Identified with:

- **the progress of civilization** (see John Gast’s picture) – the movement of the Frontier to the West
- **the survival and heroism of the pioneers** (frontiersmen, backwoodsmen)
- **the essence of American liberty** – individual freedom, direct democracy (common people making their laws)
- **the identity of the U.S. nation: Frederick Jackson Turner, the Frontier Thesis (1893):** “The peculiarity of **American institutions** is, the fact that they have been compelled to adapt themselves to **the changes of an expanding people to the changes involved in crossing a continent, in winning a wilderness, and in developing at each area of this progress out of the primitive economic and political conditions of the frontier into the complexity of city life.**”



John Gast, American Progress, 1872.
Chromolithograph published by George A. Croft.
Source: Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.

3. Religious Dissent

The Reformation:

- **Protestantism** constituted by two main 16th century religious reformers: **Martin Luther – Lutheranism**, and **Jean (John) Calvin – Calvinism**.
- Towards the end of 16th century, **Calvinism** became a **principal form of Protestantism on the British Isles**.
- Radical Calvinists – **Puritans** - wanted to purify the Church of England from its riches and pompous ceremonies. The most radical of them – **the Separatists** - left the Church of England and were persecuted by the King.
- **Antinomianism** – more radical than Puritanism: emphasis on personal judgment and individual religious experience, against the authorities of institutions, tradition, rituals.
- **The Pilgrims (Pilgrim Fathers)** – a Separatist group arriving in America in 1620. Establishing the **Thanksgiving** in 1621 (last Thursday in November).

Main Influences:

1. **The Puritan Myth of American Colonization** is based on biblical tradition.
2. **The secularization of this myth during the American Revolution** – America as **the ideal community at the end of human history**.
3. **“American Dream”** - the promise of material wealth, social mobility and political freedom.

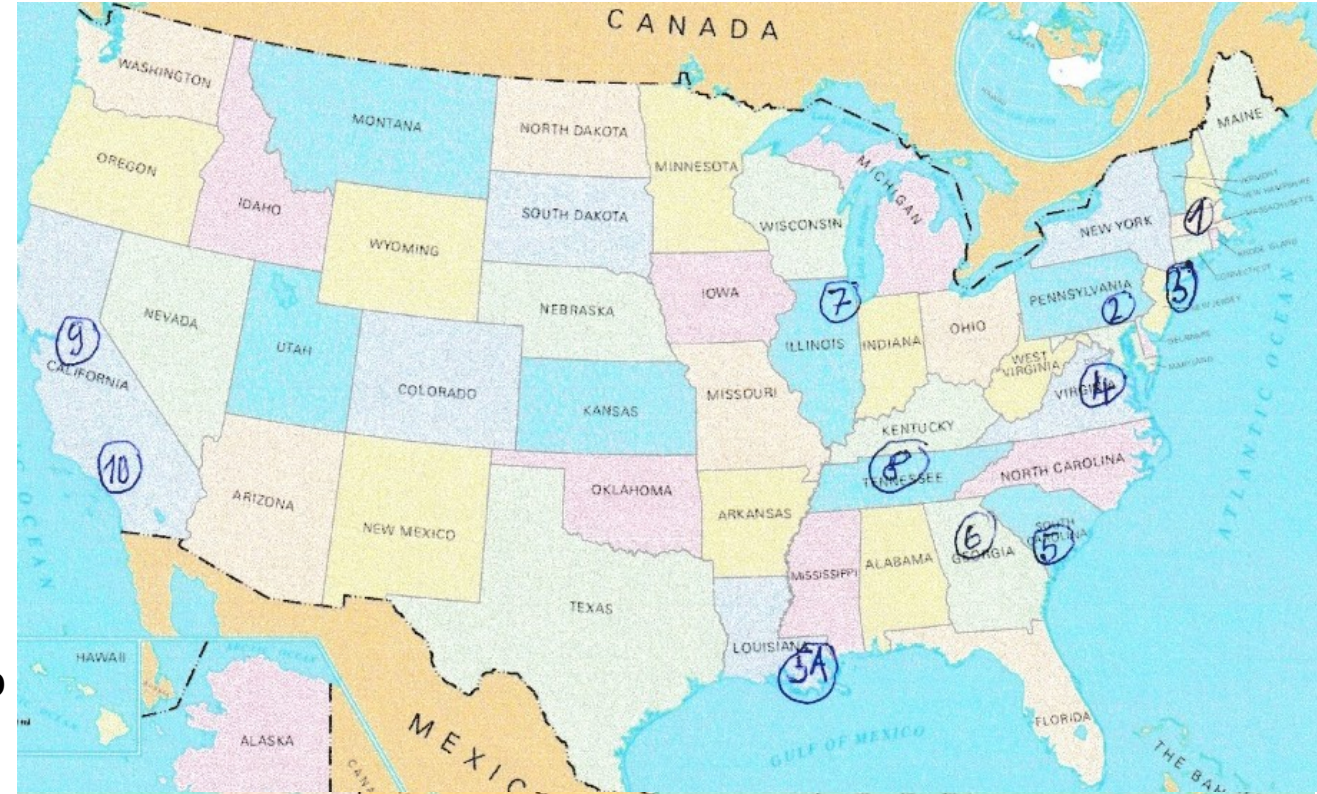


The Pilgrims led by William Bradford after their landing in November 1620

4. Polycentrism

Literary and Cultural Centres in the U.S.

- 1. New England:** Boston Area – Harvard College (1636), Connecticut River Valley, New Haven - Yale College (1701)
- 2. Philadelphia, PA** (18th century until the Revolution): Benjamin Franklin and the first circulating library
- 3. New York** (1750s - present): Theatres (since the 1750s on Broadway), Greenwich Village (later 19th century – 20th century; bohemian district), Harlem (1910s-1920s - Harlem Renaissance), publishing trade
- 4. Richmond, VA** - Edgar Allan Poe (1830s-40s)
- 5. Charleston, SC** – William Gilmore Simms (follower of J.F. Cooper, 1830s-40s)
- 5A New Orleans, LA** – Creole literature (Local Color; 1860s-1900) – George Washington Cable
- 6. Atlanta, GA** – Joel Chandler Harris (1870s-1900; *Uncle Remus* stories - African-American narratives)
- 7. Chicago, IL** (early 20th century): **Chicago School (prose):** Theodore Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, Sherwood Anderson; **Chicago Renaissance (poetry):** Carl Sandburg, Edgar Lee-Masters, Vachel Lindsay.
- 8. Nashville, TN** – Vanderbilt University – **The Fugitives (poets and critics, 1930s-1960s)**
- 9. San Francisco** – since the 1860s – Mark Twain, Jack London, Brett Harte (California Literature)
- 10. Los Angeles** – since the 1910s - Hollywood film studios



Multiculturalism and Ethnicity



Beginnings: melting pot theory- Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur (1782):

“Here the individuals of **all nations are melted into a new race of men...**”

Crèvecoeur severely criticized the treatment of African-American slaves and preferred living with the Native Americans to the life with the colonists.

Reaction of Americans against new immigrants: xenophobia against

the Irish (1840s-60s), the Chinese (the Gold Rush of 1849), the Italians (1860s-1900s), the Jews from the Eastern Europe (Ashkenazy Jews; 1860s-1920s). The ideal of **WASP** (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) as the U.S. citizen.

African-American Emancipation (1950s – 1960s) – against **segregation** (of public spaces, transport, etc.). **Ethnic riots** (1960s – 1970s; new aggressive movements – Black Moslems); **Affirmative Action** (1970s-1990s) – quotas for the acceptance of African Americans to universities. Continues until today – **Black Lives Matter** movement.

Native American Emancipation (Late 1960s-present).

Latino and Chicano Emancipation (immigrants from Latin America, the Spanish Caribbean – Cuba, etc.; Mexico) – 1970s-present. However, today the Latinos and Chicanos are facing **Trump’s illegal deportations**.

Ethnicity: ethnic boundaries are **not territorial**, they intersect communities and the U.S. society. Since the 1970s they are often combined with **gender identity** (Black Feminism...)

Achieved (Inscribed) Ethnicity: individuals are labelled as “ethnic” by their social environment

Ascribed Ethnicity: the value individuals ascribe to their ethnic identities

Literatures: African-American, Chicano, Latino, Native American, Asian American, Jewish American...

Periodization of American Literature

1. **Beginnings – 1776 – Colonial Period:** poetry: Anne Bradstreet, theology: Cotton Mather, Jonathan Edwards; Enlightenment science, autobiography: Benjamin Franklin
2. **1776-1823 The Early Republic** (transition from Classicism and Enlightenment to Romanticism): political writing: Thomas Jefferson, the Federalist, novel, journalism: H.H. Brackenridge, C.B. Brown, poetry: Joel Barlow, satire and short story: Washington Irving
3. **1820s-1860s American Romanticism:** J.F. Cooper, W.G. Simms, E.A. Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville; **Transcendentalism:** R.W. Emerson, H.D. Thoreau. **Anticipation of Modernism:** Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson.
4. **1865-1900 The Gilded Age** (after the Civil War): local color, Realism, Naturalism). The term comes from the title of a novel by Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner.
5. **1900-1940s Modernism:** T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, William Faulkner, John Dos Passos, Eugene O'Neill, Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, Zora Neale Hurston
6. **Literature after 1945**