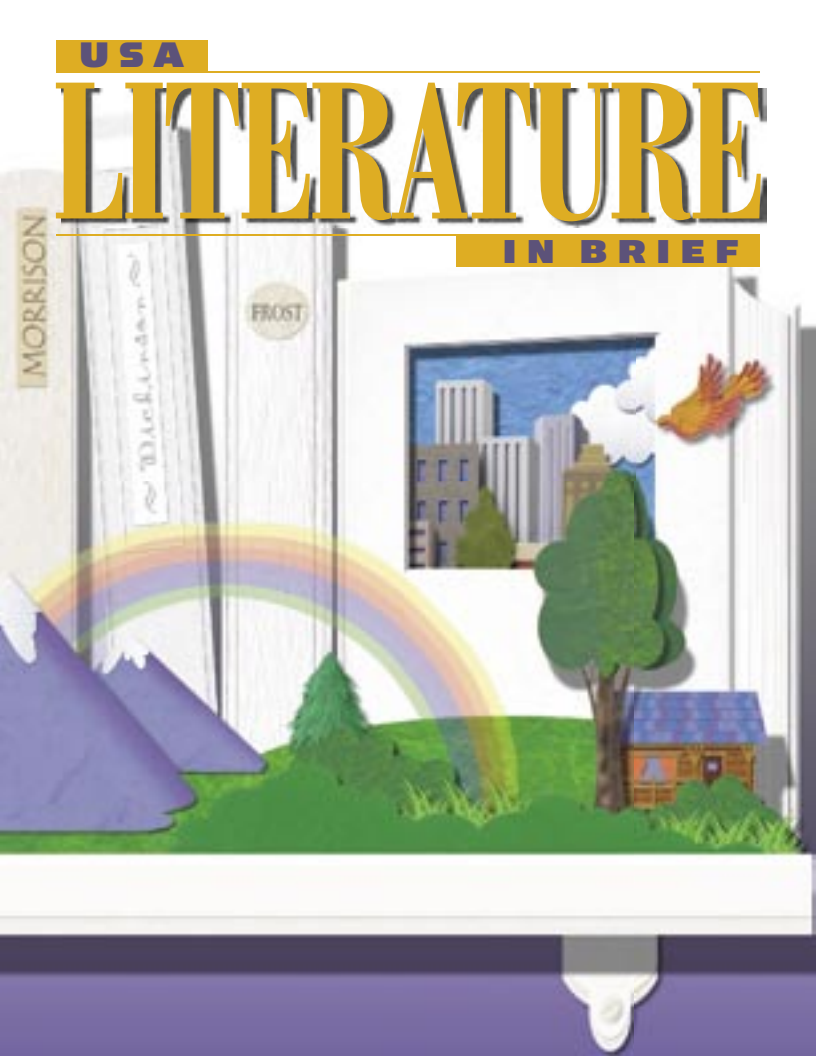
USA

LITERATURE

IN BRIEF



U.S.A. Literature
In Brief

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About the Author

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EARLY AMERICAN WRITING

"The First Thanksgiving, 1621," by J.L.G. Ferris, depicts America's early settlers and Native Americans celebrating a bountiful harvest. *Courtesy Library of Congress.*

The foundation of American literature begins with the orally transmitted myths, legends, tales, and lyrics (always songs) of Indian cultures. Native American oral tradition is quite diverse. Indian stories glow with reverence for nature

as a spiritual, as well as physical, mother. Nature is alive and endowed with spiritual forces; main characters may be animals or plants, often totems associated with a tribe, group, or individual.

The Indian contribution to America is greater than is often believed. The hundreds of Indian words in everyday American English include “canoe,” “tobacco,” “potato,” “moccasin,” “moose,” “persimmon,” “raccoon,” “tomahawk,” and “totem.” Contemporary Native American writing, discussed in chapter 8, also contains works of great beauty.

The first European record of exploration in America is in a Scandinavian language. The Old Norse Vinland Saga recounts how the adventurous Leif Eriksson and a band of wandering Norsemen settled briefly somewhere on the northeast coast of America—probably Nova Scotia, in Canada—in the first decade of the 11th century.

The first known and sustained contact between the Americas and the rest of the world, however, began with the famous voyage of an Italian explorer, Christopher Columbus, funded by the Queen of Spain, Isabella. Columbus’s journal in his “Epistola,” printed in 1493, recounts the trip’s drama.

Initial English attempts at colonization were disasters. The first colony was set up in 1585 at Roanoke, off the coast of North Carolina; all its colonists disappeared. The second colony was more permanent: Jamestown, established in 1607. It endured

starvation, brutality, and misrule. However, the literature of the period paints America in glowing colors as the land of riches and opportunity. Accounts of the colonizations became world-renowned.

In the 17th century, pirates, adventurers, and explorers opened the way to a second wave of permanent colonists, bringing their wives, children, farm implements, and craftsmen's tools. The early literature of exploration is made up of diaries, letters, travel journals, ships' logs, and reports to the explorers' financial backers. Because England eventually took possession of the North American colonies, the best known and most anthologized colonial literature is English.

It is likely that no other colonists in the history of the world were as intellectual as the Puritans, most of them of English or Dutch origin. Between 1630 and 1690, there were as many university graduates in the northeastern section of the United States, known as New England, as in England. The self-made and often self-educated Puritans wanted education to understand and execute God's will as they established their colonies throughout New England.

Puritan style varied enormously—from complex metaphysical poetry to homely journals and crushingly pedantic religious history. Whatever the style or genre, certain themes remained constant. Life was seen as a test; failure led to eternal damnation and hellfire, and success to heavenly bliss.

This world was an arena of constant battle between the forces of God and the forces of Satan, a formidable enemy with many disguises.

Scholars have long pointed out the link between Puritanism and capitalism: Both rest on ambition, hard work, and an intense striving for success. Although individual Puritans could not know, in strict theological terms, whether they were "saved" and among the elect who would go to heaven, Puritans tended to feel that earthly success was a sign of election. Wealth and status were sought not only for themselves, but as welcome reassurances of spiritual health and promises of eternal life.

Moreover, the concept of stewardship encouraged success. The Puritans felt that in advancing their own profit and their community's well-being, they were also furthering God's plans. The great model of writing, belief, and conduct was the Bible, in an authorized English translation. The great antiquity of the Bible made it authoritative to Puritan eyes.

As the 1600s wore on into the 1700s, religious dogmatism gradually dwindled, despite sporadic, harsh Puritan efforts to stem the tide of tolerance. The spirit of toleration and religious freedom that gradually grew in the American colonies was first established in Rhode Island and Pennsylvania, home of the Quakers. The humane and tolerant Quakers, or "Friends," as they were known, believed in the sacredness of the individual conscience as the fountainhead of social order and

morality. The fundamental Quaker belief in universal love and brotherhood made them deeply democratic and opposed to dogmatic religious authority. Driven out of strict Massachusetts, which feared their influence, they established a very successful colony, Pennsylvania, under William Penn in 1681.

Literary Independence

The hard-fought American Revolution against Britain (1775-1783) was the first modern war of liberation against a colonial power. The triumph of American independence seemed to many at the time a divine sign that America and her people were destined for greatness. Military victory fanned nationalistic hopes for a great new literature. Yet, with the exception of outstanding political writing, few works of note appeared during or soon after the Revolution.

Americans were painfully aware of their excessive dependence on English literary models. The search for a native literature became a national obsession. America's literary independence was slowed by a lingering identification with England, an excessive imitation of English or classical literary models, and difficult economic and political conditions that hampered publishing.

James Fenimore Cooper
1789-1851

James Fenimore Cooper, like Washington Irving, was one of the first great American writers. Like other Romantic writers of the era, he evoked a sense of the past (in his day, the American wilderness that had preceded and coincided with early European settlement). In Cooper, one finds the powerful myth of a "golden age" and the poignance of its loss.

While Washington Irving and other American writers before and after him scoured Europe in search of its legends, castles, and great themes, Cooper helped create the essential myth of America: European history in America was a re-enactment of the Fall in the Garden of Eden. The cyclical realm of nature was glimpsed only in the act of destroying it: The wilderness disappeared in front of American eyes, vanishing before the oncoming pioneers like a mirage. This is Cooper's basic tragic vision of the ironic destruction of the wilderness—the "new Eden" that had attracted the colonists in the first place.

The son of a Quaker family, he grew up on his father's remote estate at Otsego Lake (now Cooperstown) in central New York State. Although this area was relatively peaceful during Cooper's boyhood, it had once been the scene of an Indian massacre. Young Fenimore Cooper saw frontiersmen and

Indians at Otsego Lake as a boy; in later life, bold white settlers intruded on his land.

Natty Bumppo, Cooper's renowned literary character, embodies his vision of the frontiersman as a gentleman, a Jeffersonian "natural aristocrat." Early in 1823, in *The Pioneers*, Cooper had begun to imagine Bumppo. Natty is the first famous frontiersman in American literature, and the literary forerunner of countless fictional cowboy and backwoods heroes. He is the idealized, upright individualist who is better than the society he protects. Poor and isolated, yet pure, he is a touchstone for ethical values, and prefigures Herman Melville's Billy Budd and Mark Twain's Huck Finn.

Based in part on the real life of American pioneer Daniel Boone—who was a Quaker like Cooper—Natty Bumppo, an outstanding woodsman like Boone, was a peaceful man adopted by an Indian tribe. Both Boone and the fictional Bumppo loved nature and freedom. They constantly kept moving west to escape the oncoming settlers they had guided into the wilderness, and they became legends in their own lifetimes.

The unifying thread of the five novels collectively known as the *Leather-Stocking Tales* is the life of Natty Bumppo. Cooper's finest achievement, they constitute a vast prose epic with the North American continent as setting, Indian tribes as major actors, and great wars and westward migration as social

background. The novels bring to life frontier America from 1740 to 1804. Cooper's novels portray the successive waves of the frontier settlement: the original wilderness inhabited by Indians; the arrival of the first whites as scouts, soldiers, traders, and frontiersmen; the coming of the poor, rough settler families; and the final arrival of the middle class, bringing the first professionals—the judge, the physician, and the banker. Each incoming wave displaced the earlier: Whites displaced the Indians, who retreated westward; the "civilized" middle classes who erected schools, churches, and jails displaced the lower-class individualistic frontier folk, who moved further west, in turn displacing the Indians who had preceded them. Cooper evokes the endless, inevitable wave of settlers, seeing not only the gains but the losses.

Like Rudyard Kipling, E.M. Forster, Herman Melville, and other sensitive observers of widely varied cultures interacting with each other, Cooper was a cultural relativist. He understood that no culture had a monopoly on virtue or refinement.

NEW ENGLAND ROMANTICISM

The Romantic movement, which originated in Germany but quickly spread, reached America around the year 1820. Romantic ideas centered around the spiritual and aesthetic dimension of nature, and the importance of the individual mind and spirit. The Romantics underscored the importance of self-expressive art for the individual and society.

The development of the self became a major theme; self-awareness a primary method. If, according to Romantic theory, self and nature were one, self-awareness was not a selfish dead-end but a mode of knowledge opening up the universe. If one's self were one with all humanity, then the individual had a moral duty to reform social inequalities and relieve human suffering. The idea of "self," which suggested selfishness to earlier generations, was redefined. New compound words with positive meanings emerged: "self-realization," "self-expression," "self-reliance."

As the unique, subjective self became important, so did the realm of psychology. Exceptional artistic effects and techniques

were developed to evoke heightened psychological states. The "sublime"—an effect of beauty in grandeur (for example, a view from a mountaintop)—produced feelings of awe, reverence, vastness, and a power beyond human comprehension.

Romanticism was affirmative and appropriate for most American poets and creative essayists. America's vast mountains, deserts, and tropics embodied the sublime. The Romantic spirit seemed particularly suited to American democracy: It stressed individualism, affirmed the value of the common person, and looked to the inspired imagination for its aesthetic and ethical values.

Transcendentalism

The Transcendentalist movement, embodied by essayists Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, was a reaction against 18th century Rationalism, and closely linked to the Romantic movement. It is closely associated with Concord, Massachusetts, a town near Boston, where Emerson, Thoreau, and a group of other writers lived.

In general, Transcendentalism was a liberal philosophy favoring nature over formal religious structure, individual insight over dogma, and humane instinct over social convention. American Transcendental Romantics pushed radical individualism to the extreme. American writers—then or later—often saw themselves as lonely explorers outside society

and convention. The American hero—like Herman Melville's Captain Ahab, or Mark Twain's Huck Finn—typically faced risk, or even certain destruction, in the pursuit of metaphysical self-discovery. For the Romantic American writer, nothing was a given. Literary and social conventions, far from being helpful, were dangerous. There was tremendous pressure to discover an authentic literary form, content, and voice.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, the towering figure of his era, had a religious sense of mission. Although many accused him of subverting Christianity, he explained that, for him "to be a good minister, it was necessary to leave the church." The address he delivered in 1838 at his alma mater, the Harvard Divinity School, made him unwelcome at Harvard for 30 years. In it, Emerson accused the church of emphasizing dogma while stifling the spirit.

Ralph Waldo Emerson
1803-1882

Emerson is remarkably consistent in his call for the birth of American individualism inspired by nature. In *Nature* (1836), his first publication, the essay opens:

> Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchers of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories, criticism. The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we [merely] through their

eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs. Embosomed for a season in nature, whose floods of life stream around and through us, and invite us by the powers they supply, to action proportioned to nature, why should we grope among the dry bones of the past...?

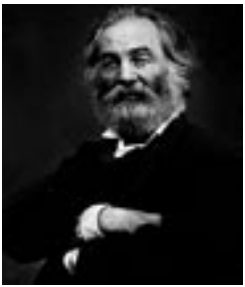
Much of his spiritual insight comes from his readings in Hinduism, Confucianism, and Islamic Sufism.

Henry David Thoreau
1817-1862

Henry David Thoreau was born in Concord and made it his permanent home. From a poor family, like Emerson, he worked his way through Harvard. Thoreau's masterpiece, *Walden, or Life in the Woods* (1854), is the result of two years, two months, and two days (from 1845 to 1847) he spent living in a cabin he built at Walden Pond, near Concord. This long poetic essay challenges the reader to examine his or her life and live it authentically.

Thoreau's essay "Civil Disobedience," with its theory of passive resistance based on the moral necessity for the just individual to disobey unjust laws, was an inspiration for

Mahatma Gandhi's Indian independence movement and Martin Luther King's struggle for black Americans' civil rights in the 20th century.



Walt Whitman
1819-1892

Born on Long Island, New York, **Walt Whitman** was a part-time carpenter and man of the people, whose brilliant, innovative work expressed the country's democratic spirit. Whitman was largely self-taught; he left school at the age of 11 to go to work, missing the sort of traditional education that made most American authors respectful imitators of the English. His *Leaves of Grass* (1855), which he rewrote and revised throughout his life, contains "Song of Myself," the most stunningly original poem ever written by an American.

The poem's innovative, unrhymed, free-verse form, open celebration of sexuality, vibrant democratic sensibility, and extreme Romantic assertion that the poet's self was one with the universe and the reader, permanently altered the course of American poetry.