**America: Literary Context 1880-1940**

**pre-1880**

***Sentimentalism***

Popular with women readers, domestic novels written in the sentimental style tend to feature a young girl protagonist who must depend on her moral compass to guide her through an immoral world, a path that frequently leads to marriage. Literature that evoked a sentimental response to a particular injustice became identified with women co-opting sentimental conventions to shine light on social problems. The most popular American novel of the 19th century, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1852), used sentimentality to address the evils of slavery. Sentimental literature was also often associated with Christianity and/or forms of Christian benevolence applied to reform movements. Much of the reform literature addressed itself to developing a model of citizenship that dovetailed with class mobility, assuming the goal of middle-class belonging.

***Romanticism***

American Romanticism was the first full-fledged literary movement that developed in the U.S. It was made up of a group of authors who wrote and published between about 1820 and 1860, when the U.S. was still finding its feet as a new nation. These writers were influenced by the Romantic movement that had developed in Britain. Like the British Romantics, their work emphasized emotion, a love of nature, and imagination.

The U.S.'s unique history and landscape influenced the movement in special ways. The American Romantics were preoccupied with questions of democracy and freedom, which were rooted in the American Revolution that had led to independence from Britain back in 1776. The U.S.'s natural landscape—very different from Europe's—also influenced the writers of this movement in special ways. "The frontier," for example, is a big idea in the work of American Romantic writers.

A lot of the values and ideas we often associate with American culture—values like individualism and democracy—are reflected in American Romantic writing, which played a really important role in spreading those values.

### *The Novel*

The novel is a very important part of the American Romantic movement which is notable because, back in Europe the Romantic movement was all about poetry. Maybe American Romantics liked the novel because it was bigger… just like their frontier?

### *Formal Experimentation*

The American Romantics liked to experiment with form. Given that these were writers who were big on individualism, is it any wonder that they broke many literary conventions?

### *Symbolism*

The American Romantics used symbols to allude to truths or knowledge that exist beyond rationality.

### *Nature*

It's a big theme in American and British Romanticism. In fact, an obsession with trees, flowers, fields, and sunsets is one of the things that makes Romanticism (whether of the American or British variety) Romanticism.

### *Individualism*

Individualism is the quintessential American value. American Romantic writers are nonconformists. They want us to follow our own minds and to do our own thing, no matter how much pressure is put on us to conform. They write about individuals tested by circumstance.

### *Emotion*

Heartbreak, happiness, awe, and rage: these emotions (and all emotions) are very important in American Romantic literature. That's because the writers of this literature believed that emotions shape our experience and our knowledge of the world. Emotions are central to our identity.

### *Imagination*

For the American Romantics, the imagination is so important because it allows us to express our own individuality. It also allows us to access experiences and knowledge beyond our "rational" minds.

### *The American Revolution*

The American Revolution is the main historical event that influenced the American Romantics. Most of these writers were writing not long after the Revolution and they had high hopes for the new nation.

### *Democracy and Freedom*

The U.S. is built on the principle of democracy. That's why the thirteen American colonies revolted against the British Empire in the first place. Democracy and freedom are values that are prized by American Romantic writers.

### *The Frontier*

The U.S. was expanding very quickly around the time that the American Romantics were writing. The country was moving westward: people were moving out in droves to territories that had been acquired by the government. The frontier as a place (and as an idea) became central to the work of a number of American Romantic writers.

***Transcendentalism***

The adherents to Transcendentalism believed that knowledge could be arrived at not just through the senses, but through intuition and contemplation of the internal spirit. As such, they professed skepticism of all established religions, believing that Divinity resided in the individual. Many distinctly Romantic tropes echo through the pages of Transcendental literature. Obviously, the predilection to turn to the natural world for intimations of truth was a recurrent theme for the Romantics. In Transcendental philosophy, the grind of ordinary life and society are seen as barriers between the self and the spirit. Thus, Nature presents a way to free the mind of its typical distractions. The very word “transcend” connotes moving beyond some stultifying condition of mind or body. Another strongly Romantic concept that the Transcendentalists embraced was the renewed potency and potentiality of the individual. Specifically, the imagination was glorified as one of the defining, almost divine characteristics of consciousness. Through imagination, the human mind could extend itself in ways that had never been considered. Transcendentalists differed somewhat from the Romantics in that they ultimately wanted to effect change, both personally and globally. Romanticism, generally speaking, was too much preoccupied with the ego and aesthetics to work for change in the real world. This newly enlightened, transcendent individual could go into the world and work to make it a better place. The Transcendental Movement was nothing if not idealist.

**1880s**

***Realism***

"Where romanticists transcend the immediate to find the ideal, realists center their attention to a remarkable degree on the immediate, the here and now, the specific action, and the verifiable consequence" (*A Handbook to Literature* 428).

In American literature, the term "realism" encompasses the period of time from the Civil War to the turn of the century during which authors wrote fiction devoted to accurate representation and an exploration of American lives in various contexts. As the United States grew rapidly after the Civil War, the increasing rates of democracy and literacy, the rapid growth in industrialism and urbanization, an expanding population base due to immigration, and a relative rise in middle-class affluence provided a fertile literary environment for readers interested in understanding these rapid shifts in culture. In drawing attention to this connection, Amy Kaplan has called realism a "strategy for imagining and managing the threats of social change" (*Social Construction of American Realism* ix).

*Characteristics:* (from Richard Chase, *The American Novel and Its Tradition*)

* Renders reality closely and in comprehensive detail. Selective presentation of reality with an emphasis on verisimilitude, even at the expense of a well-made plot.
* Character is more important than action and plot; complex ethical choices are often the subject.
* Characters appear in their real complexity of temperament and motive; they are in explicable relation to nature, to each other, to their social class, to their own past.
* Class is important; the novel has traditionally served the interests and aspirations of an insurgent middle class.
* Events will usually be plausible. Realistic novels avoid the sensational, dramatic elements of naturalistic novels and romances.
* Diction is natural vernacular, not heightened or poetic; tone may be comic, satiric, or matter-of-fact.
* Objectivity in presentation becomes increasingly important: overt authorial comments or intrusions diminish as the century progresses.
* Interior or psychological realism a variant form.
* A basic difference between realism and sentimentalism is that in realism, "the redemption of the individual lay within the social world," but in sentimental fiction, "the redemption of the social world lay with the individual" (*Black and White Strangers*, Kenneth Warren).

*Significant authors:*

William Dean Howells, Rebecca Harding Davis, Henry James, Mark Twain

**1890s - 1930s**

***Naturalism***

Naturalism was a literary movement or tendency from the 1880s to 1930s that used detailed realism to suggest that social conditions, heredity, and environment had inescapable force in shaping human character.

The term *naturalism* describes a type of literature that attempts to apply scientific principles of objectivity and detachment to its study of human beings. Unlike realism, which focuses on literary technique, naturalism implies a philosophical position: for naturalistic writers, since human beings are, in Emile Zola's phrase, "human beasts," characters can be studied through their relationships to their surroundings.

[T]he naturalistic novel usually contains two tensions or contradictions, and . . . the two in conjunction comprise both an interpretation of experience and a particular aesthetic recreation of experience. In other words, the two constitute the theme and form of the naturalistic novel. The first tension is that between the subject matter of the naturalistic novel and the concept of man which emerges from this subject matter. The naturalist populates his novel primarily from the lower middle class or the lower class. . . . His fictional world is that of the commonplace and unheroic in which life would seem to be chiefly the dull round of daily existence, as we ourselves usually conceive of our lives. But the naturalist discovers in this world those qualities of man usually associated with the heroic or adventurous, such as acts of violence and passion which involve sexual adventure or bodily strength and which culminate in desperate moments and violent death. A naturalistic novel is thus an extension of realism only in the sense that both modes often deal with the local and contemporary. The naturalist, however, discovers in this material the extraordinary and excessive in human nature. The second tension involves the theme of the naturalistic novel. The naturalist often describes his characters as though they are conditioned and controlled by environment, heredity, instinct, or chance. But he also suggests a compensating humanistic value in his characters or their fates which affirms the significance of the individual and of his life. The tension here is that between the naturalist's desire to represent in fiction the new, discomfiting truths which he has found in the ideas and life of his late nineteenth-century world, and also his desire to find some meaning in experience which reasserts the validity of the human enterprise. (10-11)

(Donald Pizer's *Realism and Naturalism in Nineteenth-Century American Fiction,* Revised Edition, 1984)

*Characters:*

Frequently but not invariably ill-educated or lower-class characters whose lives are governed by the forces of heredity, instinct, and passion. Their attempts at exercising free will or choice are hamstrung by forces beyond their control; social Darwinism and other theories help to explain their fates to the reader. The focus is not really on the character, but on how the characters react to circumstances.

*Setting:*

Frequently an urban setting.

*Techniques, traits and plots:*

Pessimism, determinism, predetermined fate, and detachment from the story with an overall objective tone are prominent traits of naturalism. The most common point of view is third person omniscient. Naturalist authors tend to be straight forward or frank in their writing.

Walcutt says that the naturalistic novel offers "clinical, panoramic, slice-of-life" drama that is often a "chronicle of despair" (21). The novel of degeneration is also a common type.

*Themes:*

1. Survival, determinism, violence, and taboo.

2. The "brute within" each individual, composed of strong and often warring emotions: passions, such as lust, greed, or the desire for dominance or pleasure; and the fight for survival in an amoral, indifferent universe. The conflict in naturalistic novels is often "man against nature" or "man against himself" as characters struggle to retain a "veneer of civilization" despite external pressures that threaten to release the "brute within."

3. Nature as an indifferent force acting on the lives of human beings.

4. The forces of heredity and environment as they affect--and afflict--individual lives.

5. An indifferent, deterministic universe. Naturalistic texts often describe the futile attempts of human beings to exercise free will, often ironically presented, in this universe that reveals free will as an illusion.

*Significant authors:*

Frank Norris, Theodore Dreiser, Jack London, Stephen Crane, [Edith Wharton,](http://public.wsu.edu/~campbelld/amlit/wharton.htm) *The House of Mirth* (1905), Ellen Glasgow, *Barren Ground* (1925), John Steinbeck (1902-1968), *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle*(1906)

**1918-1940**

***Modernism***

American modernist literature was a dominant trend in American literature between World War I and World War II. The modernist era highlighted innovation in the form and language of poetry and prose, as well as addressing numerous contemporary topics, such as race relations, gender and the human condition.

Influenced by the first World War, many American modernist writers explored the psychological wounds and spiritual scars of the war experience. The economic crisis in America at the beginning of the 1930s also left a mark on literature, such as in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. A related issue is the loss of self and need for self-definition, as workers faded into the background of city life, unnoticed cogs within a machine yearning for self-definition. American modernists echoed the mid-19th-century focus on the attempt to "build a self"—a theme illustrated by Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Madness and its manifestations seems to be another favorite modernist theme, as seen in Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*, Hemingway's *The Battler* and Faulkner's *That Evening Sun*. Nevertheless, all these negative aspects led to new hopes and aspirations, and to the search for a new beginning, not only for the contemporary individuals, but also for the fictional characters in American modernist literature.

Modernist literature also allowed for the development of regional trends within American literature, including the Harlem Renaissance and southern modernism. The Harlem Renaissance marked a rebirth for African American arts, centralized in the Harlem area of New York. Writers and thinkers such as Alain Locke, Claude McKay, Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston were among the key figures of the movement. The movement was connected to a vogue for African American culture, as seen too in the popularity of Jazz music, with many writers financed by white patrons. Many writers of this movement used modernist techniques to represent African American life, for instance incorporating the rhythms of Jazz music and dialects of African American culture into poetry and prose. Southern modernism similarly represented the life and unique experiences of the South using modernist aesthetics, with celebrated figures including William Faulkner and Tennessee Williams.