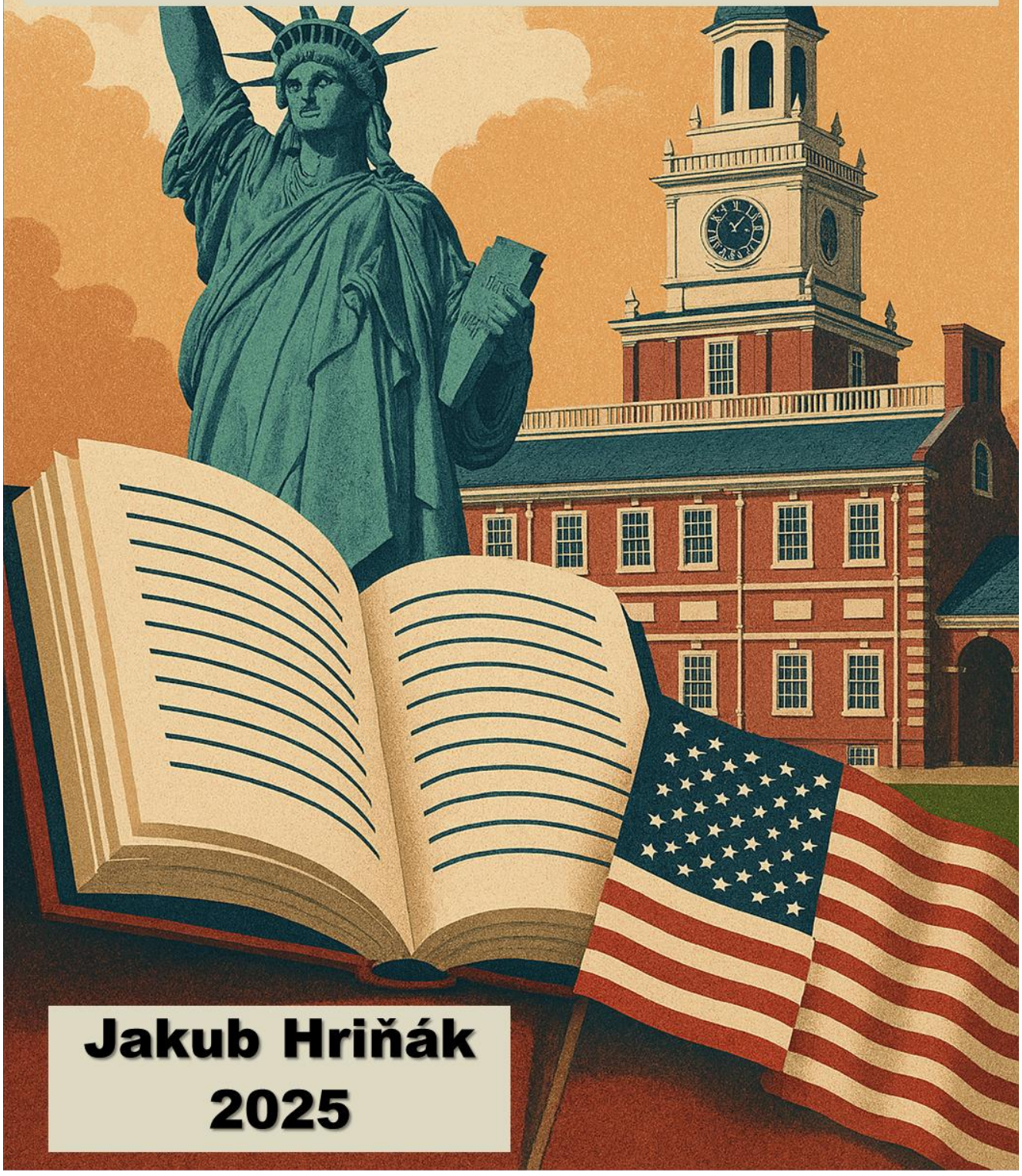
Literature and History
Seminar 2



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LITERATURE AND HISTORY SEMINAR 2

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PREFACE

The purpose of the Literature and History Seminar 2 textbook is to provide students with a structured overview of the historical and literary development of the United States from its earliest beginnings to the late twentieth century. It is designed for a university course that combines historical analysis and literary history, and it offers an interdisciplinary perspective highlighting the interaction between cultural, political and social transformations and literary expression. By presenting history and literature side by side, the textbook illustrates how major events and ideas have influenced literary creativity and how literature has reflected and shaped the identity of a nation in transition.

The structure of the textbook follows a chronological approach, beginning with the pre-colonial era and moving through the colonial period, the formation of the republic, and the dramatic changes of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Each chapter introduces key historical developments and social changes, followed by an examination of corresponding literary movements and representative authors. This dual focus demonstrates the dynamic relationship between historical context and literary production, illustrating how texts respond to political struggles, cultural ideals, and social challenges. Special attention is given to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which represent periods of significant transformation in American society and literature, including industrialisation, civil rights movements, and the emergence of modernist and postmodernist aesthetics.

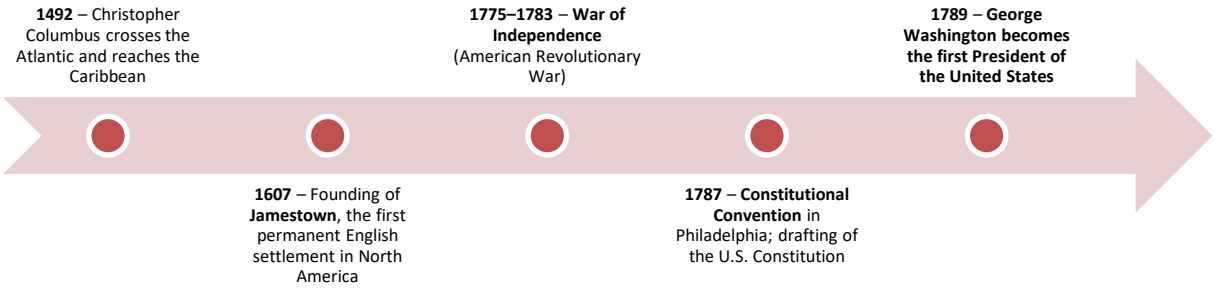
This textbook is intended as both a source of factual information and a tool for critical engagement and academic discussion. The study questions and tasks at the end of each chapter encourage students to analyse, compare and interpret historical and literary phenomena, thereby fostering independent thinking and research skills. References to primary and secondary sources offer opportunities for further exploration and a better understanding of context. By integrating historical facts with literary developments, the book aims to help students recognise cultural patterns and appreciate the complexity of American identity as reflected in its literature.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the reviewers for their valuable insights and constructive feedback, which have contributed to the quality of this textbook. I hope that this text will serve as a useful resource for students and educators alike, supporting the

development of knowledge and critical skills essential for the study of literature and history in an academic context.

1 INTRODUCTION TO THE HISTORICAL AND LITERARY DEVELOPMENT OF THE UNITED STATES

The history of the United States began long before the nation itself was born. In 1492, Christopher Columbus crossed the Atlantic Ocean and reached the Caribbean, opening the door to European expansion into the Americas. This voyage marked the beginning of a new era. Over the following centuries, various European powers, including Spain, France, the Netherlands and England, explored and settled different parts of the continent. For the future United States, the most important developments came with the establishment of British colonies along the eastern coast of North America. This chapter traces the early stages of American history, from the first settlements to the revolutionary ideas that started to influence the course of American history in the 18th century.



1.1 Historical Developments and Social Transformations

The concept of first arrival quickly becomes more complex than it seems when describing the arrival of Europeans in North America. Were they the first to set foot on the continent? Were they the first to settle? Or were they the first group to still exist today? Different nations had their own timelines and intentions. This subchapter provides a broader overview of the first sustained European presence in America, examining how it resulted in the establishment of permanent settlements.

1.1.1 First Encounters and European Exploration (1492–1607)

The first European attempts to establish permanent settlements in America started with Columbus's voyages to the Caribbean. In 1492, Christopher Columbus crossed the Atlantic and reached the Caribbean. Although he did not land in the territory that is now known as the United States, his voyage marked the beginning of European expansion into the Western

hemisphere. On his second journey, in 1493, Columbus ordered the construction of a small settlement called Isabella on the island of Hispaniola (in the present-day Dominican Republic). According to the National Humanities Center, it was intended to be a permanent town, but hunger and disease made survival difficult. Isabella barely survived until 1496 when Columbus ordered a new town to be built on the island to serve as the Spanish capital (now Santo Domingo) (National Humanities Center, 2013). Despite the hardships experienced, Columbus's early settlements signalled the beginning of Europe's long-term presence in the Americas.

Why did American geographers name the land discovered by Columbus America? According to O'Callaghan (2006), Columbus believed that he had reached Asia. This is why the newly discovered lands were not named after him. It was Amerigo Vespucci who argued that these territories constituted a separate continent. His letters later influenced a German scholar, who, while revising a geography book, named the continent America in Vespucci's honour, adopting the feminine form of his first name.

The contact between European settlers and Indigenous peoples was immediate and often complex. From the very beginning, this interaction shaped the course of colonisation politically, economically, and culturally. European settlers arrived with technologies that were unfamiliar to Indigenous communities. They introduced new animal species and crops such as wheat and sugarcane. These exchanges had a lasting effect on Indigenous ways of life. However, the arrival of Europeans also had devastating consequences. Some diseases spread rapidly among Indigenous populations who had no immunity to them. While some relationships were based on trade and cooperation, many others were characterised by violence and deep misunderstanding. European expansion often resulted in the loss of land, autonomy and cultural continuity for Indigenous peoples (Mann, 2005; Richter, 2011). To sum it up, the first encounters between Europeans and Indigenous people were not simple. They were dynamic, often tragic, and central to the beginnings of America.[1]

By the early 1600s, England had begun to play a more active role in North America, shifting its focus from exploration to long-term settlement. English explorers had already mapped much of the eastern coastline and identified areas that were suitable for agriculture, trade and strategic control. Unlike earlier expeditions, which were primarily focused on discovery, this new phase was driven by the intention to establish permanent settlements. The establishment

[1] For a more detailed exploration of Indigenous history, study chapter 6.

of Jamestown in 1607 marked a turning point in American history – the beginning of a permanent English presence on the continent (Kupperman, 2007; Horn, 2005). This period laid the groundwork for the subsequent colonial era.

1.1.2 Colonial Beginnings (1607–1775)

The colonial beginnings of the United States cover the European colonisation of North America from the early 17th century until the American Revolution. The establishment of Jamestown in 1607 and Plymouth in 1620 can be characterised as the beginning of permanent English settlement in North America. These two colonies had different origins and purposes. According to Fisher (1985), **Jamestown** was founded by the Virginia Company for economic reasons, to expand English trade and generate profit from agriculture and exports. In contrast, **Plymouth** was founded by the Pilgrims. Freedom from religious persecution had motivated them to leave England and settle in Holland. However, after several years, they felt that the liberal Dutch lifestyle was corrupting their children, and they were losing their English heritage. This motivated them to leave Holland and settle in the New World. In this context, it is important to say that despite facing hardships such as disease, hunger and conflict with Native Americans in the early years, both colonies survived and laid the groundwork for future English expansion. Jamestown and Plymouth became the symbolic starting points of English colonisation, each representing different motivations and models of settlement.

Development of the Thirteen Colonies

The Thirteen Colonies developed gradually in the 17th and early 18th century, forming three distinct regions: New England, the Middle Colonies, and the Southern Colonies. New England was shaped by Puritan values and small-scale farming. The Middle Colonies were known for trade. The Southern Colonies relied on plantation agriculture and enslaved labour (Mark, 2021). While each colony had its own charter, governance, and cultural identity, they were united by language, religion, and loyalty to the British Crown. As the colonies grew, they started to perceive themselves not just as extensions of Britain, but as communities with their own interests and identities. By the mid-18th century, the colonies had become economically and culturally distinct, yet united in their desire for autonomy.

Colonial life was shaped by geography, climate, and cultural background. In New England, rocky soil and cold climate led to fishing, shipbuilding, and trade. The Middle Colonies had fertile land, which supported diverse agriculture and commerce. The South developed large

plantations growing tobacco, rice, and indigo, relying heavily on enslaved labour. Religion played a central role. According to Mark (2021), Puritanism dominated New England, Quakers and other Protestant sects shaped the Middle Colonies, and Anglicanism was prevalent in the South. It must be emphasised that the social hierarchies were rigid, with landowners and merchants at the top, and servants and enslaved people at the bottom. Despite its diversity, colonial society laid the foundations for American values such as hard work, religious freedom, and community life.

1.1.3 The Revolutionary Period and the Period of Confederation (1775–1789)

The desire for independence was not a sudden impulse, but rather a spirit that had been growing among the American colonies for decades. Far from the established rules and restrictions of the Old World, the people of the New World began to create their own laws and ways of life. This sense of autonomy became central to colonial identity. When British policies began to threaten this freedom, the colonists responded with growing resistance. As O'Callaghan (2006) emphasises, **the Boston Tea Party** of 1773 was one of the most iconic acts of protest. 342 chests of tea belonging to the British East India Company were thrown into Boston Harbour by American patriots dressed as Mohawk Indians, protesting both the tax on tea and the perceived monopoly of the East India Company. This event, alongside other tensions, ultimately led to the outbreak of the War of Independence in 1775.

War of Independence (1775–1783)

The American Revolutionary War lasted from 1775 to 1783. It was not only a military conflict but also a struggle for legitimacy and international recognition. As the conflict escalated, revolutionary ideas gained power. Thomas Paine's pamphlet entitled Common Sense, published in 1776, focused on the reasons why the colonies should become independent. Paine's clear, direct language helped to shift public opinion and inspire political action. A committee was formed to draft **the Declaration of Independence**. O'Callaghan (2006) argues that the committee to write the document justifying the colonies' separation from Great Britain consisted of Thomas Jefferson of Virginia, John Adams of Massachusetts, Robert Livingston of New York, Benjamin Franklin of Pennsylvania, and Roger Sherman of Connecticut. The document stated that all people are created equal, have certain basic rights that no government can take away and that all governments derive their authority from the people. This was in contrast to the British system, where the governments derived their authority from one person – a king or a queen. Despite early setbacks, the Continental Army,

led by George Washington, secured key victories. In 1783, British and American leaders signed **the Treaty of Paris**, which ended the war. Under the terms of the treaty, Great Britain recognised American independence. After the war, the Thirteen Colonies were incorporated into **the United States of America (USA).**

The Period of Confederation (1783–1789)

After independence, the newly formed United States faced the challenge of creating a functioning government. The Articles of Confederation, ratified in 1781, provided a loose framework but proved inadequate. That was the reason for the meeting held in Philadelphia in 1787. The meeting was attended by 55 delegates elected by the legislatures of 12 states. The leaders of Rhode Island opposed any move to strengthen the central government, so they did not send a delegation. Most of the delegates were young, college-educated, upper-class landowners (National Park Service, 2019; Wisc PB Unizin, 2020). They agreed on the need for a stronger central government and proposed a structure with three branches: legislative, executive, and judicial. **The Constitution of the United States** was signed on 17 September 1787, and George Washington became the first President in 1789.

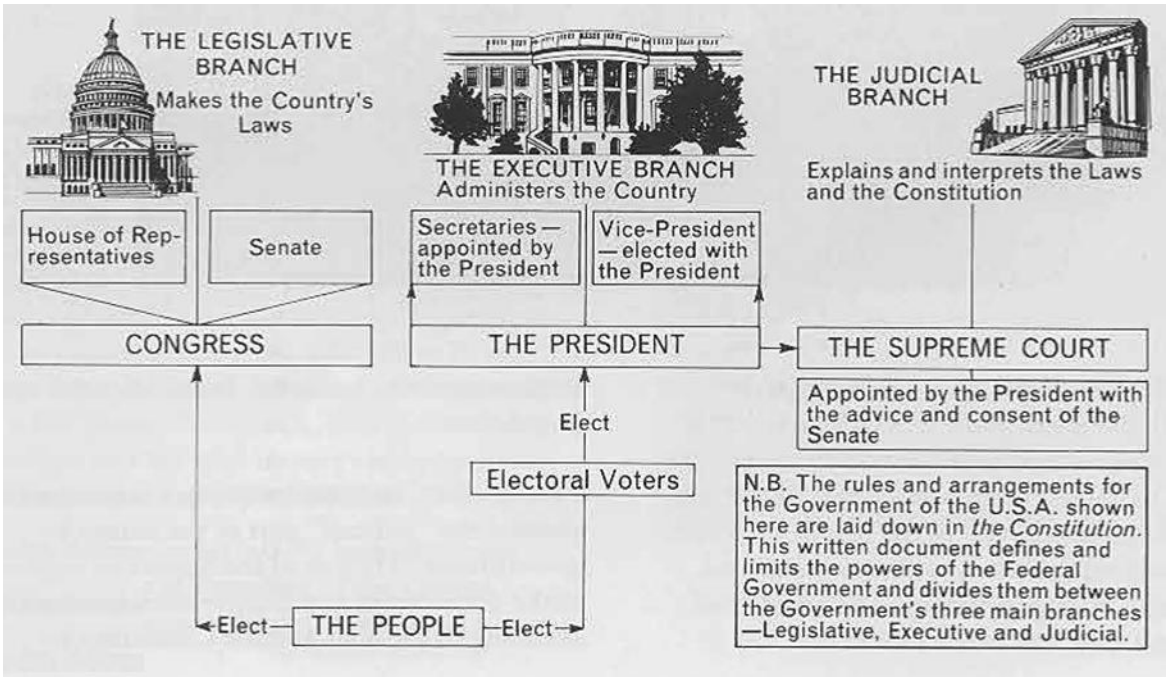


Fig. 1. The Structure of the New Government (Adapted from An Illustrated History of the USA, B. O'Callaghan, 2006, Pearson Education).

1.2 Introduction to the History of American Literature

American literature has developed alongside the nation's history, reflecting its struggles, ideals, and transformations. From colonial literary works to postmodern experimentation, each literary period offers insight into the cultural and intellectual life of its time.

This overview introduces the major phases of American literary development:

- Native American Oral Tradition (pre-1600–present)
- Early American and Colonial Literature (pre-1600–1776)
- Revolutionary Period and the American Enlightenment (1760–1783)
- Early National Period (1783–1820)
- Romanticism (1820–1860)
- Realism and Naturalism (1860–1914)
- Modernism (1914–1945)
- Postmodernism (1945–1980s)
- Contemporary American Literature (1980s–present)

This subchapter focuses on the beginnings of American literature. Later chapters will discuss other literary phases in relation to relevant historical periods.

1.2.1 Native American Oral Tradition

The history of American literature began with the oral tradition of Native American literature. This tradition is rich and varied. It includes myths, legends, songs, chants, speeches, and stories that have been passed down through the generations, since there was no written tradition before European contact. Although the oral heritage differed from tribe to tribe, specific patterns can be observed. Many narratives reflect a deep spiritual connection to nature, often portraying it as a mother figure. These stories helped people to make sense of their existence and the world around them. The linguistic diversity among Native American communities was extraordinary, with over fifty language families and hundreds of distinct languages spoken. This rich oral tradition formed the basis of the earliest expressions of American literary culture, long before the written word.[2]

[2] For a more detailed exploration of Native American literature, study chapter 6.

1.2.2 Early American and Colonial Literature

Before permanent English colonies were established, European explorers documented their journeys to America in various texts. These texts are nowadays known as **the Literature of Exploration.** These writings were not literary in the modern sense, but they played a significant role in shaping European perceptions of the New World. The literature of exploration includes a variety of genres: travel narratives, ship logs, letters, promotional tracts, and ethnographic descriptions. According to VanSpanckeren (1994), the first European record of exploration in America is *The Old Norse Vinland Saga* (c. 1000), written in a Scandinavian language. Other texts related to this period are Christopher Columbus's journal in his *Epistola* (1493), which is based on the trip's drama and Bartolomé de las Casas's *History of the Indians* (c. 1527–1561). Thomas Hariot depicted the exploration of Roanoke in *A Brief and True Report of the New-Found Land of Virginia* (1588), and Captain John Smith, one of the leaders of the Jamestown colony, wrote about his experiences, including the story of the Indian maiden Pocahontas, in his *Generall Historie of Virginia* (1624). These early texts established the foundations of American literature and influenced how Europeans perceived and interpreted the New World.

Colonial Literature in America was shaped by the realities of colonial life, such as harsh conditions, isolation, and the need to build communities. Settlers struggled against the wilderness and had little time for the arts. As a result, according to High (2000), literary production was often practical, religious, or historical in nature. Texts served to record events and preserve communal memory. The imaginative or artistic dimension of literature was secondary to its moral and theological purpose. Puritanism had a profound influence on colonial literature, especially in New England. Puritans saw life as a test: failure led to damnation, success to salvation. This duality shaped their writing, which often quoted Scripture and interpreted events as divine signs. The Puritan literary style included metaphysical poetry, homely journals, and religious histories.

Significant authors from New England during the colonial period:

- William Bradford (1590–1657)
- Roger Williams (c. 1603–1683)
- Anne Bradstreet (c. 1612–1672)
- Michael Wigglesworth (1631–1705)
- Mary Rowlandson (1637–1711)

- Edward Taylor (c. 1644–1729)
- Samuel Sewall (1652–1730)

Significant authors from the Southern and Middle Colonies during the colonial period:

- Robert Beverley (c. 1673–1722)
- William Byrd (1674–1744)
- Jupiter Hammon (c. 1720–c. 1800)
- Olaudah Equiano (c. 1745–c. 1797)

1.2.3 Revolutionary Period and the American Enlightenment

The Revolutionary Period and the American Enlightenment represent a significant phase in the literary development of the United States. This era, spanning mainly from the early 1760s to the end of the Revolutionary War in 1783, was marked by a growing emphasis on reason, individual liberty, and questioning traditional authority, principles rooted in the European Enlightenment and adapted to the American context. In the colonies, Enlightenment ideals started to flourish among thinkers and writers who tried to articulate a vision of self-governance and human rights. VanSpanckeren (1994, p. 14), in this context, asserts that "except outstanding political writings, few works of note were produced during or soon after the Revolution." In addition, High (2000) emphasises that by the time of the American Revolution (1775–1783), American writers had ventured beyond the Puritan literary style and its religious themes. They had developed styles of writing that grew out of a distinctly American experience. Literature of this period was predominantly political and philosophical, serving as a tool for persuasion, mobilisation, and ideological formation.

Key figures of this period include:

- Benjamin Franklin (1706–1790)
- Thomas Paine (1737–1809)
- Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826)

Benjamin Franklin's writing is quite modern and marked by clarity and pragmatism. He believed good prose should be smooth, plain, and direct, avoiding unnecessary ornamentation. According to High (2000, p. 15), "Although he strongly disagreed with the opinions of the Puritans, his works show a return to their plain style. At the same time, he had no liking for

poetry and felt that writing should always have a practical purpose." His tone is often humorous and self-reflective, with a strong didactic purpose.

Thomas Paine's style is passionate and rhetorically powerful. In Common Sense, he combines logical argumentation with emotional appeal, aiming to stir public sentiment and provoke action. His language is simple and direct, used to reach a broad audience, including those without formal education.

Thomas Jefferson's prose is formal and philosophically grounded. In the Declaration of Independence, his style reflects classical rhetorical training, using balanced sentences, parallel structures, and precise diction. He appeals to reason and universal principles and focuses on natural law and Enlightenment ideals.

Although the Revolutionary Period formally concluded with the signing of the Treaty of Paris in 1783, Enlightenment ideas continued to shape American society and writing also during the Early National Period. The belief in reason, civic virtue, and progress remained central to the cultural and intellectual life of the young republic, influencing both political discourse and the emerging literary identity of the United States.

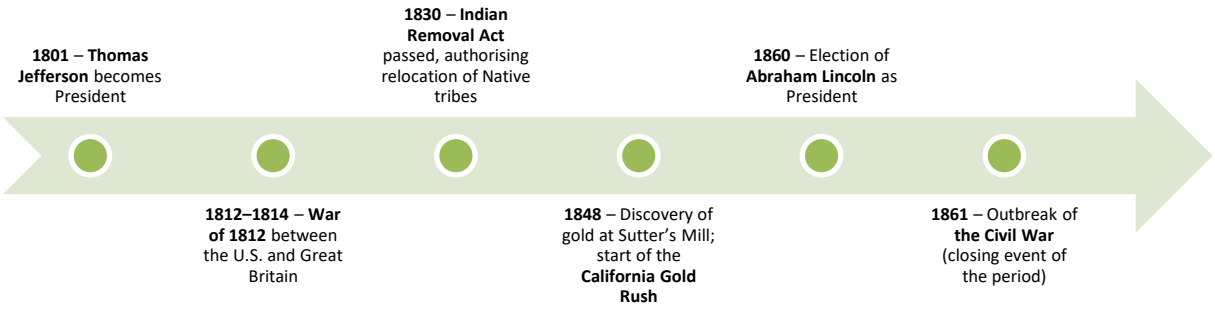
STUDY QUESTIONS & TASKS

- How did geography influence the economic and social structures of the three colonial regions?
- How did the spirit of independence manifest in early colonial society?
- In what ways did religious belief shape early American society and colonial literary works?

- Create a comparative chart of New England, Middle, and Southern Colonies, focusing on economy, religion, and governance.

2 THE UNITED STATES IN THE FIRST HALF OF THE 19TH CENTURY (1800–1860)

The first half of the 19th century was a formative period in the development of the United States. Following the presidency of George Washington, the young nation entered a phase of expansion, conflict, and transformation. Between 1800 and 1860, the United States evolved from a fragile union of former colonies into a rapidly growing power with ambitions that stretched across the continent. This era was marked by technological innovation, increasing immigration, and deepening social divisions. As the USA expanded to the west and industrialised, internal tensions arose that would lead to civil war. The events of this period laid the foundations for modern America and were reflected in the nation's cultural and intellectual life, including its emerging literary traditions.



2.1 Historical Developments and Social Transformations

The first half of the 19th century was a period of dynamic change in the history of the United States. After the foundation of the republic and the presidency of George Washington, the country entered a new phase marked by territorial expansion, political conflict, economic transformation, and social shifts. Between 1800 and 1860, the United States grew in size, population, and influence, while facing internal divisions that would culminate in the Civil War.

2.1.1 Political Tensions and the War of 1812

After Thomas Jefferson became the president in 1801, relations between the United States and Great Britain started to worsen. The British were still present in North America and continued to interfere with American trade and expansion. One of the most serious issues that influenced the beginning of the 19th century was the British practice of impressment, as they forced

American sailors into service in the Royal Navy. This, along with trade restrictions and British support for Native American resistance in the West, increased tensions (National Archives, 2025). The situation escalated when British forces attacked the American ship Chesapeake in 1807, killing and capturing American sailors. Jefferson responded with the Embargo Act, which aimed to pressure Britain and France by stopping all American exports. However, the embargo hurt American merchants more than it helped, and it was soon replaced by weaker trade laws.

Meanwhile, in the Northwest Territory, Native American tribes led by Tecumseh and his brother, known as The Prophet, resisted American expansion. They received support from British agents in Canada, which further deepened the conflict with American settlers and politicians (Hickey, 2012). In 1812, under President James Madison, the United States declared war on Great Britain, known as **the War of 1812**. The conflict was fought on land and sea, with battles in the Great Lakes region, the South, and along the Canadian border. Although the war ended in 1814 with **the Treaty of Ghent** and no significant territorial changes, it had lasting effects (Hickey, 2012). It confirmed American independence, weakened Native American resistance, and encouraged domestic manufacturing. The war also increased national pride and helped shape the identity of the young republic.

2.1.2 Industrialisation and Urbanisation

Between 1820 and 1860, there was the first major wave of industrial growth in the United States. The introduction of power-driven machinery, especially in textile production, changed the way goods were manufactured and distributed. Factories started to replace traditional workshops, and production moved from homes to industrial centres. This shift was most visible in the Northeast, where rivers provided energy for early mills and where cities like Lowell and Boston became symbols of industrial progress. The development of transportation played a key role in this transformation. The construction of canals, such as the Erie Canal (completed in 1825), and the rapid construction of railroads allowed raw materials and finished products to move faster and farther than ever before (Filante, 1974; Garmon, 2020). Railways connected distant regions, supported trade, and encouraged the growth of new towns along the routes.

The rapid industrial growth in the first half of the 19th century transformed American cities into centres of production, attracting both domestic and foreign labour and reshaping the social structure of the nation. As the industry expanded, cities grew. Urban centres attracted

workers from rural areas and immigrants from Europe, especially Ireland and Germany. According to O'Callaghan (2006), between 1840 and 1860, more immigrants arrived than ever before. Many of these immigrants were of Irish origin. These newcomers provided the labour force needed for factories, but they also faced poor living conditions, overcrowding, and limited access to education and healthcare. Despite these challenges, cities became centres of economic activity and innovation. The rise of industry also changed the structure of American society. A new working class became part of society, and with it came early labour movements demanding better working conditions. At the same time, a growing middle class started to benefit from increased access to consumer goods and services. By 1860, industrialisation and urbanisation had reshaped the American economy and society, laying the foundation for the modern United States.

2.1.3 Native Americans and the Reservation System

As American settlers moved westward in the first half of the 19th century, Native American tribes were forced to leave their lands. At first, the federal government tried to regulate relations through treaties. Cincotta (1994) asserts that these agreements allowed settlers to travel through Native territory in exchange for payments or goods, and often promised protection and clearly defined boundaries. However, these promises were rarely honoured. Once settlers started to occupy the land, enforcement of boundaries became impossible. Native communities were politically powerless and surrounded by settlers. As the population grew and land hunger intensified, pressure on Native communities became unbearable.

The situation worsened under President Andrew Jackson, who strongly supported westward expansion. The idea of relocating Native tribes, however, had already been considered by earlier presidents. "Although Presidents Thomas Jefferson and James Monroe argued that the Indian tribes in the Southeast should exchange their land for lands west of the Mississippi River, they did not take steps to make this happen" (Office of the Historian, 2025). In 1830, Congress passed the Indian Removal Act, which authorised the forced relocation of Native tribes living east of the Mississippi River. Following the forced relocation, the government started to formalise the reservation system. These reservations were intended to isolate Native Americans from settlers. The removal of Native Americans and the creation of reservations were not only a consequence of expansion, but a strategy to control indigenous populations.

2.1.4 California Gold Rush

The California Gold Rush, one of the largest mass migrations in the history of the USA, started with the discovery of gold at Sutter's Mill in 1848. On the 24th of January, James Wilson Marshall found gold nuggets in the American River at the foot of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. This discovery started a mass migration. According to O'Callaghan (2006), by mid-June 1848, shops and businesses were empty, as about three-quarters of the male population of San Francisco left the city for the gold mines. Thousands of people from across the United States and abroad travelled to California in search of fortune, creating a diverse and often chaotic society in the mining camps.

The Gold Rush not only transformed California's economy and society but also helped to shape its role within the expanding United States. By 1852, San Francisco's population had exploded from 500 to over 150,000. The massive growth of the population accelerated California's admission to the Union as the 31st state in 1850. Over $2 billion worth of gold was extracted during the Gold Rush. Although the Gold Rush started with great promise, its intensity began to fade in the mid-1850s. As easily accessible gold became harder to find, many miners abandoned their claims or were forced to work for larger companies that used more advanced equipment.

2.1.5 Slavery

In the middle of the 19th century, during the period of tremendous growth, there was a fundamental economic difference between the northern and southern regions. In the North, manufacturing and industry were well established. At the same time, the South's economy was based on a system of large-scale farming. The Southern plantation agriculture, particularly the cultivation of cotton and tobacco, depended on the labour of enslaved African Americans. Southern leaders defended slavery as essential to their way of life, arguing that it was protected by the Constitution and necessary for prosperity. In contrast, abolitionist sentiment in the North started to grow stronger, thanks to religious movements, moral arguments, and the publication of anti-slavery literature.

Leaders in the North believed that slavery should not be allowed. Southern leaders, on the other hand, supported the spread of slavery. Northern opposition to slavery's extension into the new western territories led many southerners to fear that the existence of slavery was in danger. As new states were added to the Union, the question of whether they would permit slavery threatened the fragile balance between free and slave states. The election of Abraham

Lincoln in 1860 was seen by many Southern states as a direct threat to their interests. Although Lincoln did not initially call for the abolition of slavery, his opposition to its expansion was enough to prompt several Southern states to secede from the Union (History Tools, 2024). In early 1861, these tensions culminated in open conflict, marking the outbreak of the Civil War.

2.2 Literary Movements and Cultural Reflections

The first half of the 19th century was not only a time of political and social transformation in the United States, but also a period of significant literary development. As the nation expanded territorially and industrially, American writers began to explore new themes, styles, and philosophical ideas that reflected the changing character of society. Literature became a space for expressing national identity, individual experience, and responses to pressing issues such as nature, democracy, slavery, and reform.

This section examines the major literary movements that emerged between 1800 and 1860, including Early National Literature, American Romanticism, Transcendentalism, and the beginnings of Realism. It also introduces key authors whose works shaped American literary tradition and mirrored the cultural shifts of their time.

2.2.1 Early National Literature

Following the Revolutionary War and the establishment of the United States, American literature entered a transitional phase known as the Early National Period. This era, spanning roughly from 1783 to 1820, reflects the young republic's efforts to define its cultural identity and distinguish itself from European traditions. In the early years of the new republic, there was disagreement about how American literature should grow. According to High (2000), there were three different points of view:

- The first group wanted books expressing national feelings, i.e. the unique character of the nation, not European culture.
- The second group believed the United States should see itself as a new branch of English culture, i.e. American literature was too young to be independent of the British literary tradition.
- The third group also felt that the call for national literature was a mistake, i.e. literature was universal, rising above the time and place it was written.

The discussion about how American literature should grow continued for almost a hundred years without any clear decision. As American literature developed and flourished, the most significant writers found a way to combine the best qualities of the Old and New Worlds.

While Enlightenment ideals continued to influence political and philosophical writing, a new literary sensibility started to emerge in the early post-revolutionary literature. Writers started to explore American themes, landscapes, and characters through imaginative prose and poetry. They began experimenting with fiction, satire, and narrative forms that reflected the complexities of national life. The period was marked by a growing interest in folklore, history, and the moral dimensions of individual experience.

Key figures of this period include:

- Charles Brockden Brown (1771–1810)
- Washington Irving (1789–1859)
- James Fenimore Cooper (1789–1851)

Charles Brockden Brown became the first professional American writer. His writing style is characterised by subconscious fears, dramatised scientific theories, and a personal theory of fiction. The settings of his literary works are distinctively American.

By the beginning of the 19th century, New York City became the centre of American writing. Writers producing their literary works in this region were called “Knickerbockers“, and the period from 1810 to 1840 is known as “the Knickerbocker Era“ of American literature. The name of this school comes from the literary work A History of New York by Diedrich Knickerbocker, which was written by Washington Irving in 1809. Washington Irving is often characterised as the first American author to gain international literary recognition. He wrote numerous short stories, biographies, histories, and tales of his travels.

James Fenimore Cooper pioneered the American historical novel. His writing is characterised by vivid descriptions of nature, frontier life, and the tension between civilisation and wilderness. In novels like The Pioneers and The Last of the Mohicans, Cooper explores themes of heroism, cultural conflict, and the shaping of American identity.

2.2.2 American Romanticism

In the first half of the 19th century, American literature experienced a significant transformation as writers started to move away from classical forms and Enlightenment ideals

towards a more emotional, imaginative, and individualistic style. This shift gave rise to American Romanticism, a literary movement that flourished between the 1820s and the 1860s. Influenced by European Romanticism and shaped by the unique social and cultural context of the United States, American Romanticism emphasised nature, intuition, personal freedom, and the exploration of the human spirit.

Romantic writers focused on the individual's experience and inner world. According to High (2000), they often celebrated intuition over reason and nature over civilisation. The natural landscape of America, i.e. its forests, mountains, and rivers, became a central setting in Romantic literature, representing freedom, purity, and spiritual truth. Writers used these settings to explore themes of identity and morality, often contrasting the innocence of nature with the corruption of society. One of the defining features of American Romanticism was its diversity. While some authors focused on gothic and psychological themes, others explored philosophical ideas or national myths. The movement included poets, novelists, and essayists who experimented with form and language to express complex emotional and intellectual experiences.

Poetry

Poetry played a central role in the development of American Romanticism. Romantic poets often celebrated the beauty of nature, the power of the imagination, and the emotional depth of the human experience. Their works reflected a desire to break free from classical forms and to create a distinctly American voice in literature. The concept of the self was redefined, moving away from representing selfishness and instead being characterised by positive attributes such as self-realisation, self-expression, and self-reliance (VanSpanckeren, 1994). Through their innovative use of language and focus on individual experience, Romantic poets helped shape a uniquely American literary identity that continues to influence writers to this day.

Among the most influential poetic expressions of American Romanticism was the rise of **Transcendentalism.** The movement was based on a fundamental belief in the unity of the world and God, and its followers were committed to this belief. It was believed that the soul of each individual was identical with the world. The authors wanted to explore their inner spiritual lives. They were not interested in old-fashioned American patriotism or growing prosperity. They believed that every human being was inherently good. For the Transcendentalists, individualism, logic and intuition were all essential.

Key figures include:

- Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882)
- Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862)

Perhaps the most revolutionary poetic voice of the nineteenth-century American literature was **Walt Whitman (1819–1892),** whose work can be characterised as a departure from conventional poetic forms and themes. Deeply influenced by Transcendentalist ideals, particularly those of Emerson, Whitman celebrated the individual, the body, democracy, and the spiritual unity of all beings.

Another influential poetic group emerged alongside the Transcendentalists during the American Romantic period: the so-called **Boston Brahmins**. This term referred to a group of wealthy, Harvard-educated poets and intellectuals who aimed to cultivate a sophisticated and morally uplifting national literature. Drawing on European literary traditions while engaging with American themes, their poetry was characterised by formal elegance, cultural conservatism and broad popular appeal. Unlike the more radical and spiritually introspective Transcendentalists, the Brahmins upheld the values of tradition, decorum, and intellectual restraint.

Key figures include:

- Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807–1882)
- Oliver Wendell Holmes (1809–1894)
- James Russell Lowell (1819–1891)

In contrast to both the philosophical idealism of the Transcendentalists and the cultivated refinement of the Boston Brahmins, **Emily Dickinson (1830–1886)** represents a singular poetic voice that is not easy to categorise. Writing primarily in isolation, she kept most of her poetic work unknown during her lifetime. Dickinson developed a highly original style marked by compressed language, unconventional punctuation, and capitalisation. Her poetry explores themes of death, immortality, nature, and the inner life. Even though not formally aligned with any literary movement of her time, Dickinson's work reflects the spirit of Romanticism while anticipating the innovations of modernist poetry.

Prose

While poetry was a dominant form of expression during the American Romantic period, fiction also played a significant role in articulating the movement's central themes. Romantic

prose explored the complexity of the human mind, the tension between good and evil, and the symbolic power of nature and the supernatural. It often challenged Enlightenment rationalism and embraced emotional depth, moral ambiguity, and the darker aspects of the human experience.

Literary themes include:

- Escapism (journeys, quests, etc.)
- The common man as a hero
- Nature as a refuge and a source of knowledge and/or spirituality
- Forbidden/socially inappropriate/tragic romantic relationships
- Independence, equality and freedom
- Struggles of the Byronic hero
- Native history
- Mysticism and abnormal psychology
- Abolition

Dark Romanticism, sometimes referred to as the "anti-Transcendentalist" movement, emerged as a reaction to the optimistic idealism of the Transcendentalists. While sharing Romanticism's interest in emotion, imagination, and the individual, Dark Romantics focused on human fallibility, sin, and the psychological effects of guilt and madness. Their works often featured gothic settings, supernatural elements, and symbolic explorations of evil.

Key figures include:

- Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804–1864)
- Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849)
- Herman Melville (1819–1891)

Although often overlooked in their time, as high culture was represented by male writing, many **women writers** of the Romantic period made significant contributions to American prose. Their works frequently addressed themes such as domestic life, gender roles, morality, and social reform. Some engaged with Romantic ideals, while others challenged them by highlighting the constraints placed on women in nineteenth-century society. Female writing consisted mainly of sentimental novels and domestic novels.

Key figures include:

- Catharine Maria Sedgwick (1789–1867)
- Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811–1896)
- Fanny Fern (1811–1872)
- Harriet Wilson (1807–1870)
- Harriet Jacobs (1818–1896)

The sentimental novel was aimed at eliciting emotional responses (both from the reader and from the characters). The novels portrayed the souls and emotions of women, female heroines, and asked for sympathy for the oppressed and condemned (women, slaves, even criminals). In the domestic novel, the protagonist was a woman set in her domestic environment. The protagonist went through many hardships, often caused by gender inequality and injustice in the relationship between a man and a woman.

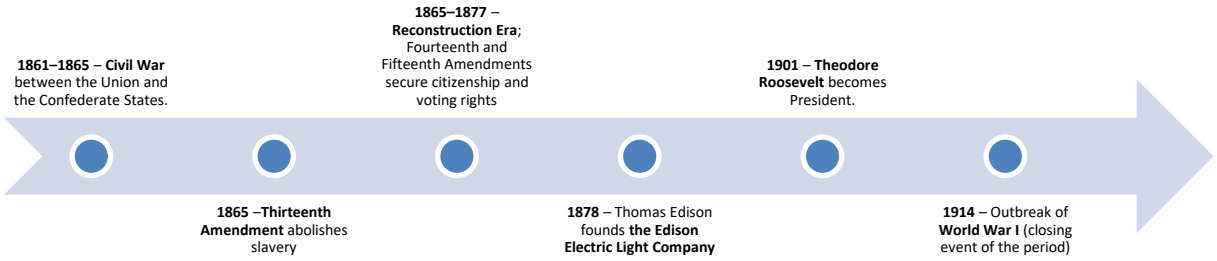
STUDY QUESTIONS & TASKS

- What were the main political and economic developments in the United States between 1800 and 1860?
- What were the main effects of the California Gold Rush on American society and westward expansion?
- How did the issue of slavery contribute to growing tensions between the North and the South?
- What were the key characteristics of Early National Literature, and how did it reflect the cultural identity of the young republic?
- What themes were commonly explored in Romantic poetry and prose?

- Research one female author from the period and present how her work contributed to American literature and social change.

3 THE UNITED STATES IN THE SECOND HALF OF THE 19TH CENTURY (1860–1914)

The second half of the nineteenth century marks a transformative era in the history of the United States, characterised by significant political, social, and cultural shifts. The Civil War was followed by a period of Reconstruction aimed at healing the divisions between North and South and redefining the status of formerly enslaved people. In the decades that followed, rapid industrialisation, urban expansion, and waves of immigration reshaped the American landscape and its societal structures. These developments were mirrored in the literary sphere, where writers moved away from romantic idealism and started to explore the realities of everyday life, regional aspects, and social issues. This chapter provides an overview of the key historical events and examines how they influenced the literary movements that contributed to the evolving cultural identity of the United States between 1860 and the outbreak of the First World War.



3.1 Historical Developments and Social Transformations

The second half of the 19th century and the first decade of the 20th century can be characterised as periods of dynamic changes in the history of the United States. The following sections outline the significant historical developments that defined this era and laid the foundations for the modern American state.

3.1.1 Civil War

In the middle of the 19th century (during an era of enormous growth), a fundamental economic difference existed between the northern and southern regions in America. In the North, manufacturing and industry were well established. At the same time, the South's economy was based on a system of large-scale farming that depended on the labour of African-American enslaved people. Northern opposition to slavery's extension into the new

western territories led many Southerners to fear that the existence of slavery was in danger. According to Cincotta (1994), the election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860 was seen by many Southern states as a direct threat to their interests. Although Lincoln did not initially call for the abolition of slavery, his opposition to its expansion was enough to prompt several Southern states to secede from the Union. In early 1861, these tensions culminated in open conflict, marking the outbreak of the Civil War.

The Civil War started in 1861 and ended in 1865. It was the four-year war between the United States and 11 Southern states that seceded from the Union and formed the Confederate States of America. In this context, Farmer (2008) asserts that the war brought destruction on an unprecedented scale. Battles such as Gettysburg, Antietam, and Vicksburg were the deadliest ones. Over 600,000 lives were lost, making it the deadliest conflict in American history. The Union's victory in 1865 ensured the survival of the federal system and led to the formal abolition of slavery through the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

3.1.2 Reconstruction Era

The period of Reconstruction followed the end of the Civil War and represented a complex effort to restore national unity and redefine the social order in the post-slavery United States. Its primary objectives were to reintegrate the Southern states into the Union and to establish legal protections for formerly enslaved individuals. According to Foner (2004) and Lash (2021), the federal government introduced significant constitutional changes, mainly the Fourteenth Amendment, which granted citizenship to all persons born or naturalised in the United States, and the Fifteenth Amendment, which prohibited racial discrimination in voting rights.

Despite the legislative advances, Reconstruction faced persistent resistance from Southern states and white supremacist groups, including the Ku Klux Klan. O'Callaghan (2006) emphasises that local governments in the South enacted restrictive laws known as Black Codes, aimed to limit the freedoms of African Americans and maintain racial hierarchies. These were later institutionalised through Jim Crow legislation, which formalised segregation for decades. Reconstruction also exposed tensions between federal authority and the rights of the states. While some progress was made in terms of education, political participation and

civil rights for African Americans during Reconstruction, many of these gains were reversed by the end of the 1870s.[3]

3.1.3 Industrialisation and Urbanisation

The decades following the Civil War can be characterised as a period of rapid industrial expansion that completely changed the economic and social structures of the United States. This transformation was driven by technological innovation, the growth of factory production, and the development of an extensive railway network that connected previously isolated regions. Key industries such as steel, oil, and textiles flourished, contributing to the development of powerful industrial centres, particularly in the North and Midwest.

One of the significant personalities influencing the second half of the 19th century was Thomas Edison. Edison's greatest success was in the practical application of electricity. He founded the Edison Electric Light Company in 1878. He had a clear commercial goal – to take the massive market for lighting homes, streets and workplaces away from gas. To do this, Edison needed to develop a long-lasting electric light bulb. Edison then built complete electrical generating systems to power his bulbs.

Another important man who influenced this period was Henry Ford. Ford started making cars in the 1890s. He became famous for developing the Model T. The cars were assembled from exactly the same parts. The cars were even painted the same colour. In 1913, Ford started to use assembly-line methods to make the complete Model T. Making a car in this new way took 1 hour and 33 minutes. He is therefore considered the father of mass production in the twentieth century.

William Keith Kellogg and John Harvey Kellogg became popular because they invented the breakfast cereal. Kellogg's Corn Flakes were invented in the 1890s. The Kellogg brothers originally invented the cereal as a breakfast food to combat indigestion at the sanatorium where they worked. The breakfast cereal became popular, and Kellogg went on to found the Kellogg Company to produce cornflakes for the general public. The process was patented in 1896, after a legal battle between the two brothers and in 1906, W. K. Kellogg opened the "Battle Creek Toasted Corn Flake Company" and carefully hired his first 44 employees.

As cities expanded to accommodate a growing workforce, urbanisation accompanied industrial growth. Millions of immigrants from Europe arrived in search of economic

[3] For a more detailed exploration of this topic, study chapter 7.

opportunities. According to Howard (2016), until 1880, most of these immigrants came from Germany and Ireland. Then, a significant change occurred. Italians, Poles, Greeks, Russians, Hungarians, Czechs and others from Southern, Central and Eastern Europe began to arrive instead. By 1896, over half of all immigrants entering the United States were from Eastern or Southern Europe. This demographic shift led to overcrowded housing, inadequate sanitation, and strained infrastructure.

The period after the Civil War was characterised as the Golden Age due to the rapid industrial growth. American millionaires and their opulent residences symbolised the nation's prosperity. However, society was corrupted and full of crime and social injustice. The layer of gold was very thin. This is why Mark Twain used the term **The Gilded Age** to describe this period. He took this term from the title of his book, The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today, in which Twain describes people who have been morally destroyed by the dream of becoming rich.

3.1.4 Innovation, Transport, and Social Change at the Beginning of the 20th Century

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, many Americans began calling for changes to improve society and to limit the power of big businesses. This reform movement, later known as the Progressive Era, developed in response to the problems caused by rapid industrial growth, political corruption, and poor living and working conditions. People wanted the government to take a more active role in solving these issues and protecting ordinary citizens. Progressive reformers focused on several key areas. They pushed for better working conditions, campaigns for women's voting rights gained strength, and public health became a significant concern in crowded cities. Journalists helped raise awareness by exposing unfair practices in politics and business (O'Callaghan, 2006; Cincotta, 1994). Although the Progressive movement became stronger in the early twentieth century, its ideas and goals had already started to take shape in the 1890s.

The first decade of the twentieth century is often described as the beginning of materialism and consumer culture in the United States. Economic growth, technological progress, and increased urbanisation contributed to a society that placed growing value on goods, leisure, and public image. Advertising became more widespread, and mass production made consumer items more accessible to the middle class.

In 1901, Theodore Roosevelt became the youngest person ever to assume the presidency, and he quickly gained popularity. His presidency marked a new phase in American politics. Roosevelt's approach signalled the beginning of a more active role for the federal government in addressing social and economic issues. A small symbol of Roosevelt's cultural impact was the creation of the Teddy Bear in 1902, named after the president following a widely publicised hunting story. President Theodore Roosevelt was invited on a hunting trip in Mississippi. After an unsuccessful day, his hosts captured a black bear and tied it to a tree, offering Roosevelt the chance to shoot it. He refused, considering it unsportsmanlike. The incident was widely reported in newspapers, and a political cartoon by Clifford Berryman illustrated the moment, showing Roosevelt turning away from the bear. Inspired by the cartoon, a New York shopkeeper named Morris Michtom created a stuffed toy bear and placed it in his shop window, calling it "Teddy's Bear".

The early twentieth century was a time of remarkable innovation and transformation in the United States. Technological progress accelerated, particularly in transport. The automobile industry started to develop in the 1890s, with Henry Ford introducing mass production techniques. In 1903, the Wright brothers, Orville and Wilbur, achieved the first sustained flight with the Wright Flyer in North Carolina, marking the beginning of modern aviation. The year 1904 saw several significant developments in transport infrastructure: construction began on the Panama Canal, the New York Subway made its first run, and the Trans-Siberian Railway opened for service. The first vehicle number plates were issued in the United States, reflecting the growing presence of cars on American roads. Technological innovation also extended into everyday life. The first electric washing machine, the Thor, was introduced in 1907, and the same year saw the invention of Bakelite by Leo Baekeland – the first fully synthetic plastic.

The decade also witnessed significant social and cultural developments. Leisure activities included family gatherings, baseball games, picnics, and Sunday drives – whether by horse-drawn carriage or the new family car. In the evenings, families often gathered around the piano for music and singing. In terms of cultural developments, the release of the first American silent film, The Great Train Robbery (directed by Edwin S. Porter), marked a milestone in cinematic storytelling. In the first decade, two important organisations were founded. In 1909, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was established to advocate for civil rights (O'Callaghan, 2006; Cincotta, 1994). One year later, the Boy Scouts of America was founded. In 1911, the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in

New York exposed the dangerous working conditions faced by many industrial labourers, particularly women. The tragedy, which claimed the lives of 146 workers, led to demands for improved safety standards in the workplace.

The period concluded with the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, following the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria. The war would soon draw in nations across the globe, including the United States, and mark the end of an era defined by innovation, optimism, and growing social awareness.

3.2 Literary Movements and Cultural Reflections

The second half of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth century brought significant changes not only in American society but also in literature. As the country experienced war, industrialisation, urbanisation, and social reform, writers responded by shifting away from romantic idealism and turning towards more realistic portrayals of life. Literature became a mirror of the times, reflecting the complexities of modern existence, regional diversity, and the struggles of ordinary people.

3.2.1 Realism and Naturalism

Realism emerged as a dominant literary movement in the post-Civil War period, focusing on everyday life, social structures, and the psychological depth of characters. Writers tried to depict the world as it was, without sentimentality and idealisation. Authors focused on ordinary characters, believable situations, and the moral complexities of real-world experiences. The movement sought to reflect the social realities of a rapidly changing nation. The Industrial Revolution, with its factory system, the growth of cities, rapid wealth, increased immigration, and the shifting of social classes, provided a whole new material for writers to report and interpret.

Basic features of Realism include:

- Setting that are thoroughly familiar to the writer
- Plots emphasising the daily experience
- Ordinary characters, which are studied in depth
- Complete authorial objectivity
- Truly reported world

Characteristic American novels of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries often explored the impact of economic and social forces on individuals, particularly those who were vulnerable due to poverty, gender, or social status. These stories revealed how industrialisation, urbanisation, and class divisions could lead to isolation, moral conflict, and personal hardship. Rather than presenting heroic figures or idealised lives, realist and naturalist authors focused on characters who struggled to find meaning and dignity in difficult circumstances. Their survival was not based on strength or status, but on inner qualities such as empathy, adaptability, and a strong sense of self (Campbell, 2020; Dudley, 2012). Through such portrayals, literature of the period offered a subtle but powerful critique of the American dream and questioned the cost of progress in a rapidly changing society.

Key figures include:

- Mark Twain (1835–1910)
- William Dean Howells (1837–1920)
- Henry James (1843–1916)
- Hamlin Garland (1860–1940)

Naturalism in literature of the time can be characterised as an extension or intensification of realism. Influenced by scientific theories such as Darwinism and social determinism, naturalist writers portrayed individuals as shaped by forces beyond their control, i.e. environment, heredity, and social conditions. Particularly, Charles Darwin's idea of the survival of the fittest, the belief that organisms adapt and evolve in response to environmental conditions, provided a significant background for naturalist writing.

Naturalism developed as a literary movement in the late nineteenth century, building upon the foundations of realism but adopting a more scientific and deterministic view of human behaviour. First articulated by the French novelist Émile Zola, naturalism was introduced to American literature by Frank Norris. Unlike realism, which focused on everyday life and moral complexity, naturalism portrayed individuals as victims of forces beyond their control, such as heredity, environment, and chance. American naturalist novels often centred on characters from the margins of society: the poor, the uneducated, and the socially excluded. Themes such as adultery, crime, prostitution, and moral decay were common, as writers tried to expose the hidden realities of urban and industrial life (Pizer, 2006; Campbell, 2020). Through this lens, naturalism opened up the underside of American society.

Key figures include:

- Frank Norris (1870–1902)
- Stephen Crane (1871–1900)
- Theodore Dreiser (1871–1945)
- Jack London (1876–1916)

3.2.2 Women Writers and the Realist Turn

While women's writing in the Romantic period was often confined to sentimental and domestic themes, the second half of the nineteenth century saw a gradual shift in both subject matter and literary style. Influenced by the broader realist movement, many female authors started to explore the psychological and social dimensions of women's lives with greater depth and complexity. Their works addressed issues such as marriage, mental health, societal expectations, and the limitations placed on women's autonomy.

A key feature of this literary shift was the move towards psychological realism, where female protagonists were portrayed not only in relation to their domestic roles but also as individuals with inner lives, desires, and conflicts. These characters frequently faced emotional isolation, societal pressure, and limited opportunities for self-expression. Through detailed narrative and introspective voice, women writers depicted the mental and emotional consequences of gender inequality. Many of these works also addressed themes of confinement and resistance (VanSpanckeren, 1994; High, 2000). The domestic space, once idealised in sentimental fiction, became a site of tension and struggle.

Key figures include:

- Rebecca Harding Davis (1831–1910)
- Elizabeth Stuart Phelps (1844–1911)
- Mary E. Wilkins Freeman (1852–1930)
- Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860–1935)
- Edith Wharton (1862–1937)

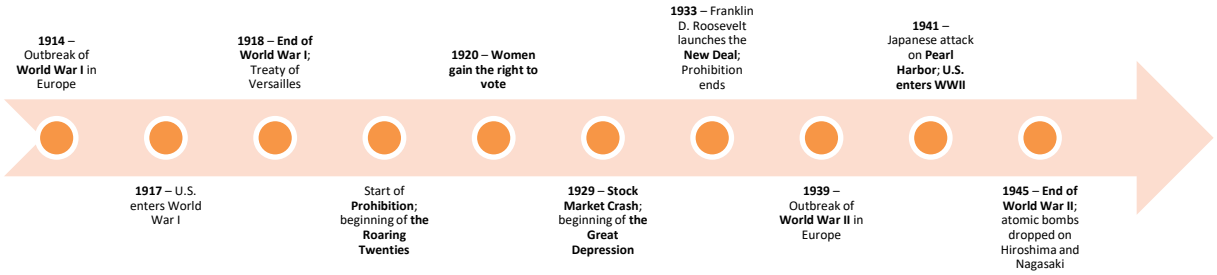
STUDY QUESTIONS & TASKS

- How did the Reconstruction Era attempt to rebuild the United States, and what challenges did it face?
- What were the key features of industrialisation and urbanisation in the late 19th century?
- How did literary works reflect the social and economic realities of the time?
- How did literature challenge the idealism of the American Dream during this period?

- Compare the themes explored by male and female writers in the late 19th century. What similarities and differences can you identify?

4 THE UNITED STATES IN THE FIRST HALF OF THE 20TH CENTURY (1914–1945)

The first half of the twentieth century was a time of significant changes for the United States. After the First World War, the country entered a period of growth and optimism, often called the Roaring Twenties, with new technologies, cultural shifts, and social changes. This prosperity ended suddenly with the Great Depression, which brought economic hardship and led to new government policies under the New Deal. In the late 1930s, global tensions rose again, and the United States moved from isolation to active involvement in the Second World War. These events influenced not only politics and society but also literature, which reflected the hopes, struggles, and transformations of the era. This chapter examines the key historical developments and literary movements that shaped American culture between 1914 and 1945.



4.1 Historical Developments and Social Transformations

The period between the beginning of the First World War and the conclusion of the Second World War brought significant changes to American society. These decades were marked by contrasting experiences: years of economic growth and cultural dynamism followed by deep economic crisis and global conflict. Political decisions, social movements, and technological progress reshaped everyday life, while the nation's role in world affairs shifted from isolation to leadership. Understanding these developments is essential for grasping how the United States evolved during the first half of the twentieth century.

4.1.1 World War I (1914–1918)

The First World War, often called the Great War, began in 1914 after the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria. To the American public, the outbreak of war in Europe came as a shock. However, for most Americans, the war seemed distant and irrelevant, a purely European affair that did not concern the United States. President Woodrow Wilson

initially promoted neutrality, reflecting the widespread belief that America should avoid foreign conflicts. The early years of the conflict were marked by trench warfare, massive casualties, and technological innovations such as machine guns and poison gas. While Americans sympathised with the suffering in Europe, they remained committed to staying out of the fighting. This initial neutrality defined U.S. policy during the first phase of the war, but circumstances would soon challenge this position.

Although the United States tried to remain neutral, economic realities tied the country to the Allied powers. American factories produced weapons, ammunition, and other supplies, which were sold primarily to Britain and France. These exports boosted the U.S. economy but also created tension with Germany, which viewed American trade as a form of indirect involvement in the war (Smith, 2018). In response, Germany adopted unrestricted submarine warfare, targeting ships that supplied the Allies. German U-boats sank several vessels, including five American ships carrying weapons. According to Boghardt (2012), the situation escalated further when British intelligence intercepted the Zimmermann Telegram, in which Germany encouraged Mexico to join the war against the United States in exchange for the return of lost territories. These provocations made neutrality increasingly untenable. By early 1917, the pressure on Wilson's administration had reached a breaking point, and the call for decisive action grew louder across the nation.

President Woodrow Wilson concluded that the United States could no longer remain on the sidelines. In April 1917, he asked Congress to declare war on Germany, framing the decision as a moral imperative to make the world "safe for democracy." American troops began arriving in Europe later that year. Their involvement helped tip the balance of power and accelerate the end of the conflict. The war officially ended in November 1918. For the United States, participation in the war marked a turning point: the nation emerged as a significant global actor, with new responsibilities and influence on the world stage. This shift set the foundation for the political, economic, and cultural transformations that shaped America's role in the twentieth century.

4.1.2 The Roaring Twenties (1919–1929)

The decade following the First World War is often remembered as a time of prosperity and optimism in the United States. Known as the Roaring Twenties, this period brought economic growth, technological progress, and cultural dynamism. Cities expanded, consumer goods became widely available, and automobiles transformed everyday life. Jazz music swept the

nation, influencing dance styles and nightlife, while new forms of entertainment, such as cinema, gained popularity. The decade also witnessed the rise of mass media, with magazines like Reader's Digest and Time shaping public opinion. Despite its vibrancy, the era was not without contradictions. In this context, Andersen (2012) asserts that prohibition, introduced in 1919, banned the production and sale of alcoholic drinks, yet speakeasies flourished as people sought ways to defy the law. The Roaring Twenties symbolised both progress and tension, setting the stage for dramatic social changes that would define modern America.

One of the most significant transformations of the 1920s was the changing role of women in American society. The concept of the "New Woman," which had emerged in the late nineteenth century, gained prominence during this decade. Women fought for and achieved the right to vote in 1920, marking a milestone in the struggle for equality. Fashion reflected this new sense of freedom: corsets and restrictive clothing gave way to shorter dresses, bobbed hairstyles, and bold makeup. **Flapper girls** became cultural icons, embracing independence and challenging traditional norms by visiting speakeasies, dancing to jazz, and adopting modern lifestyles. These changes were not universal, however. While Caucasian women gained **voting rights** in 1920, many women of colour continued to face barriers. Native American women secured the vote in 1924, Chinese women in 1943, and African-American women only after the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The decade thus marked progress, but also highlighted persistent inequalities in American society.

Fig. 2. Flapper Girls (Adapted from How to recreate a 1920's look - How to Be a Flapper Girl, Idda van Munster, 2012, https://iddavanmunster.blogspot.com/2012/02/how-to-recreate-1920s-look-how-to-be.html).

The Roaring Twenties were also a time of innovation and cultural milestones. Technological advances transformed daily life, from the introduction of sliced bread and chewing gum in 1928 to the invention of the car radio in 1929. Popular culture flourished, with the first

Mickey Mouse cartoon appearing in 1928 and the Academy Awards debuting in 1929. Dance crazes like the Charleston captured the spirit of the age, while Art Deco influenced architecture and design. Aviation pioneers such as Richard Byrd and Roald Amundsen competed to fly over the North Pole, symbolising the era's fascination with progress and adventure. Infrastructure projects like Route 66 connected the nation, and Henry Ford's announcement of the 40-hour workweek in 1926 reshaped labour practices. Yet, beneath this optimism lay fragility. In October 1929, the stock market crashed, ending the decade's prosperity. The Roaring Twenties thus remain a symbol of both innovation and vulnerability in American history.

4.1.3 The Great Depression (1929–1939)

The 1930s were defined by the Great Depression, the most severe economic crisis in American history. It began after the stock market crash of October 1929 and quickly spread across the nation, causing widespread unemployment, poverty, and uncertainty. Banks failed, businesses closed, and millions of Americans lost their savings. Families struggled to afford basic necessities, and many were forced to leave their homes in search of work. The economic collapse also affected agriculture, as falling crop prices and environmental disasters devastated rural communities. The Great Plains Dust Bowl, which worsened conditions in 1934, forced thousands of families to migrate westward in hopes of survival. This era of hardship reshaped American life, challenging traditional ideas of prosperity and security.

In response to the economic catastrophe, President Franklin D. Roosevelt introduced the New Deal, a series of programmes and reforms aimed at stabilising the economy and providing relief to those in need. These measures included job creation projects, financial regulations, and social welfare initiatives designed to restore confidence and rebuild the nation. While the New Deal did not end the Depression entirely, it marked a turning point in the relationship between government and citizens. At the same time, cultural life continued to evolve despite hardship. Prohibition, which had defined the previous decade, officially ended in 1933, signalling a shift in social attitudes. However, crime and violence remained part of the era, with notorious figures like Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow dominating headlines until their deaths in 1934. The decade revealed both resilience and vulnerability, as Americans adapted to unprecedented challenges while seeking hope for recovery.

Despite the economic struggles of the time, the 1930s saw significant progress and cultural milestones. Technological innovations such as air conditioning and Zippo lighters, introduced

in 1932, improved everyday life for many Americans. Aviation continued to capture public imagination, with Amelia Earhart becoming the first woman to fly solo across the Atlantic in 1932. Architectural achievements like the completion of the Empire State Building in 1931 reflected ambition even in difficult times. Popular culture also thrived, with new trends in music, cinema, and food, such as the invention of the cheeseburger in 1934. Meanwhile, Alcatraz became a federal prison, and gangster Al Capone was arrested for tax evasion, marking significant events in law enforcement history. Alcoholics Anonymous was founded in 1935, the same year that Frank Lloyd Wright designed his masterpiece, Fallingwater, and Parker Brothers introduced the iconic board game Monopoly. These developments illustrate how innovation and cultural expression persisted during a decade dominated by economic hardship, shaping the identity of a nation in transition.

By the mid-1930s, the worst years of the Great Depression had passed, but the United States was still struggling to achieve full economic recovery. Historians often describe 1930–1933 as the most severe phase, yet the crisis's effects continued to shape the decade, with a 1937 recession slowing progress. At the same time, major construction projects such as the Hoover Dam (1936) and the Golden Gate Bridge (1937) symbolised resilience and ambition. Popular culture continued to flourish, with Superman debuting in comic books and Disney's Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs becoming the first feature-length animated film in 1938. However, global tensions were escalating. In Europe, Hitler annexed Austria in 1938, Kristallnacht terrorised Jewish communities, and the Rome-Berlin Axis signalled a dangerous alliance. These years bridged the gap between economic hardship and the looming global conflict, marking the end of an era and the beginning of another.

4.1.4 World War II (1939–1945)

World War II began on 1 September 1939 when Nazi Germany invaded Poland, prompting Britain and France to declare war two days later. At first, the United States remained officially neutral, though public opinion was divided. Many Americans wanted to avoid another costly conflict, while others feared the growing threat of fascism. During these early years, significant events shaped global dynamics. German Jewish refugees aboard the St. Louis were tragically denied entry to the United States, Canada, and Cuba, forcing them to return to Europe (O'Callaghan, 2006; Cincotta, 1994). Meanwhile, technological and cultural milestones continued despite the war: the first commercial transatlantic flight took place, helicopters were invented, and iconic films such as The Wizard of Oz and Gone with the

Wind captivated audiences. Nylon stockings debuted in 1939, symbolising modern consumer culture even in uncertain times. These developments illustrate the contrast between innovation and instability as the world edged closer to total war.

The United States was drawn into World War II after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour on 7 December 1941, a turning point that ended isolationist policies. Following the declaration of war, America mobilised rapidly, committing to both the European and Pacific theatres. Everyday life changed dramatically, with propaganda campaigns, and women entering the workforce in unprecedented numbers (O'Callaghan, 2006; Cincotta, 1994). Popular culture reflected the era's spirit: Captain America debuted in comic books in 1941, while Cheerios, M&Ms, and the Jeep became household names. Mount Rushmore was completed, symbolising national pride during challenging times. In 1942, the Hyde Park Agreement between Roosevelt and Churchill formalised cooperation on the development of the atomic bomb, setting the stage for a technological revolution. These years transformed the United States into a global military and industrial power.

By 1943, the war started to turn in favour of the Allies. The Tehran Conference, held in November of that year, brought together Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin to plan **Operation Overlord**, the invasion of Nazi-occupied Europe. The following year, D-Day marked a decisive moment in the European theatre, while advances in the Pacific pushed Japan closer to defeat. At home, American society continued to adapt to wartime realities, with cultural shifts and technological progress shaping daily life (O'Callaghan, 2006; Cincotta, 1994). The introduction of the T-shirt in 1942 reflected practical needs. These developments highlight how cooperation and resilience defined the mid-war years, paving the way for ultimate victory.

The final year of the war, 1945, was dominated by two significant events: the defeat of Nazi Germany in May and the surrender of Japan in August. The Yalta Conference earlier that year had outlined plans for post-war Europe, but the sudden death of President Roosevelt in April left Harry S. Truman to make critical decisions. On 6 August, Truman authorised the use of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, followed by a second strike on Nagasaki three days later. Japan surrendered on 15 August, ending the most destructive conflict in human history. Technological breakthroughs accompanied victory: the first computer was built, the microwave oven was invented, and Slinky toys appeared. World War II not only reshaped

international politics but also transformed American society, setting the stage for the modern world.

4.2 Literary Movements and Cultural Reflections

The first half of the twentieth century was a time of significant changes in American literature, shaped by the same forces that transformed society. World War I, the optimism and cultural dynamism of the Roaring Twenties, followed by the despair of the Great Depression and World War II, created a background for new literary voices and movements. Writers moved beyond traditional forms, experimenting with style and exploring themes of alienation, identity, and social justice. Modernism challenged established conventions, the Lost Generation captured the disillusionment of post-war life, and the Harlem Renaissance celebrated African-American culture. Later, the hardships of the 1930s inspired socially engaged literature, while wartime experiences gave rise to narratives of resilience and moral conflict. Literature during this era became a powerful reflection of a nation in transition, revealing its hopes, struggles, and evolving cultural identity.

4.2.1 Modernism

Modernism in American literature represents a conscious break with nineteenth-century traditions. It emerged from a sense of historical discontinuity and the disillusionment caused by the First World War. Writers questioned established values and depicted a world marked by alienation, loss, and moral uncertainty. The traditional hero was replaced by the anti-hero, often portrayed as damaged or powerless, unable to draw on the past or control the future. This protagonist symbolised the modern condition: a relentless search for order in a fragmented world, where habit and repeated behaviour substitute for meaning. Modernist works reflect the collapse of religious faith and the erosion of Puritan ideals such as honour and morality, replaced by superficial lifestyles and existential doubt. If God is absent or indifferent, life lacks inherent purpose, compelling individuals to create meaning through personal commitment (VanSpanckeren, 1994; High, 2000). These aspects underline the modernist critique of a mechanised society and its impact on human identity.

Techniques in Modernist texts can be characterised as follows:

- collapsed plots
- fragmentary techniques
- shifts in perspective, voice, and tone

- stream-of-consciousness point of view
- associative techniques

A defining feature of modernist literature is its radical experimentation with form and technique. Writers abandoned conventional plots and employed fragmentation, producing texts that often begin arbitrarily and end without resolution. Meaning is suggested rather than asserted, conveyed through symbols and images rather than direct statements. Readers are invited to actively construct significance, making interpretation an essential part of the reading experience. Modernist works employ shifts in perspective, voice, and tone, incorporating colloquial speech and previously "unliterary" material to challenge traditional notions of authority. Stream-of-consciousness narration, influenced by Freudian psychology, attempts to reproduce the unedited flow of thought, revealing the disjointed and illogical nature of mental life. Associative techniques, drawing on literary, historical, and cultural allusions, evoke a lost sense of coherence while acknowledging its impossibility (VanSpanckeren, 1994; High, 2000). These innovations reflect the modernist conviction that truth is subjective and that reality must be recreated through perception.

Key figures include:

- Francis Scott Fitzgerald (1896–1940)
- Ernest Hemingway (1899–1961)
- Ezra Pound (1885–1972)
- Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888–1965)
- Edgar Lee Masters (1868–1950)
- Carl Sandburg (1878–1967)
- Edwin Arlington Robinson (1869–1935)
- Robert Frost (1874–1963)
- Wallace Stevens (1879–1955)
- William Carlos Williams (1883–1963)
- Edward Estlin Cummings (1894–1962)
- William Faulkner (1897–1962)
- John Dos Passos (1896–1970)
- John Steinbeck (1902–1968)

4.2.2 Lost Generation

The term “Lost Generation” was initially applied to survivors of World War I who found it difficult or impossible to return to a stable peacetime existence. They were considered “lost” because the war had shattered their sense of purpose and belonging. Later, the phrase was popularised by Gertrude Stein in a remark to Ernest Hemingway and came to describe a group of young American writers, many of whom lived abroad, particularly in Paris. These writers shared literary ambitions and a deep sense of disillusionment with traditional values, reflecting the cultural and moral uncertainty of the post-war world.

Common themes in their literary works can be characterised as follows:

- decadence and frivolous lifestyle
- gender roles
- idealised past
- death of the American Dream
- disillusionment

Works by the Lost Generation often depict characters searching for meaning in a fragmented world. Despite these common features, the authors had different political views and experiences of war and post-war life. This is also reflected in their writing. For example, Hemingway’s minimalist style, known as the ‘iceberg theory’, conveys emotional depth through understatement. Some of his works depict the brutality of war and the cruel side of human existence, while Fitzgerald’s novels explore the allure and emptiness of wealth and glamour (Kurbonova, 2024). Together, these writers captured the spirit of an era defined by both excitement and despair, leaving a lasting imprint on American literature.

Key figures include:

- Francis Scott Fitzgerald (1896–1940)
- Ernest Hemingway (1899–1961)
- Gertrude Stein (1874–1946)
- Ezra Pound (1885–1972)
- Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888–1965)
- John Dos Passos (1896–1970)
- Edward Estlin Cummings (1894–1962)

4.2.3 Harlem Renaissance

The Harlem Renaissance was a cultural and literary movement that flourished in the 1920s and early 1930s, centred in Harlem, New York. It marked a turning point in African-American cultural history, celebrating African-American identity through literature, music, and art. Writers explored themes of race, migration, and cultural pride, often drawing inspiration from jazz and folk traditions. This movement challenged racial stereotypes and asserted the value of African-American voices in American culture.[4]

Key figures include:

- Langston Hughes (1902–1967)
- Zora Neale Hurston (1891–1960)
- Claude McKay (1889–1948)
- Countee Cullen (1903–1946)

4.2.4 Social Realism and Proletarian Literature

The economic hardships of the Great Depression gave rise to socially engaged literature that addressed poverty, inequality, and the struggles of working-class Americans. Writers adopted a realistic approach, portraying the harsh realities of life during economic crisis and often advocating for social change. This literature rejected romanticised depictions of rural life and instead focused on the structural causes of suffering, including exploitative labour practices and systemic injustice. It reflected the urgency of the 1930s, when unemployment, displacement, and hunger dominated national consciousness. Social realism became a vehicle for critique, aiming to expose inequality and inspire reform.

Characteristic features can be characterised as follows:

- focus on working-class life and economic hardship
- critique of social injustice and inequality
- sympathetic portrayal of marginalised groups
- political undertones advocating reform
- direct, accessible language and documentary detail

[4] For a more detailed exploration of this topic, study chapter 7.

John Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath (1939) stands as a defining novel of the era, depicting the plight of migrant farmers during the Dust Bowl and highlighting themes of solidarity and resilience. Richard Wright explored racial and social oppression in works such as Native Son (1940), while John Dos Passos combined experimental techniques with political commentary in his U.S.A. trilogy. Sinclair Lewis, awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1930, offered biting critiques of middle-class conformity and materialism in novels like Main Street (1920) and Babbitt (1922), anticipating many concerns that resurfaced during the Depression. These authors gave voice to those silenced by economic and social systems, making literature a powerful instrument of critique and social awareness.

Key figures include:

- John Steinbeck (1902–1968)
- Richard Wright (1908–1960)
- John Dos Passos (1896–1970)
- Erskine Caldwell (1903–1987)
- Sinclair Lewis (1885–1951)

4.2.5 Southern Renaissance

The Southern Renaissance marked a revival of literature in the American South during the early twentieth century, shaped by the region's unique historical and cultural conditions. Tensions between the South and the North, dating back to the Civil War, persisted and reinforced cultural differences. While the North embraced industrialisation and urban growth, the South remained largely rural, agricultural, and economically disadvantaged. This slower pace of industrial change, combined with the burden of history and tradition, produced distinctive themes and subjects in Southern writing (VanSpanckeren, 1994; High, 2000). The literature of the South is not defined solely by geography but by a shared cultural memory and historical experience that shape its narratives.

Characteristics of Southern Renaissance literature:

- exploration of Southern identity and cultural conflict
- themes of race, class, and historical memory
- use of stream of consciousness and multiple perspectives
- psychological depth and moral ambiguity

- rejection of sentimental portrayals of the South

Themes in Southern literature:

- racial relations and the legacy of slavery
- prejudice, including Northern stereotypes of Southerners as despotic, ignorant, or lazy
- nostalgia for the "good old past" untouched by industrialism
- southern customs, attitudes, and habits, often critically examined

Themes between the two World wars:

- techniques of international modernism, such as stream of consciousness and complex points of view
- the history of a family linked to the history of a culture and region
- the individual's relationship to the community and the burden of the past

William Faulkner emerged as the leading figure of this movement, using experimental forms to portray the South's troubled history. His novels, such as The Sound and the Fury (1929), challenged readers with their complexity and emotional intensity. Other writers, including Katherine Anne Porter and Robert Penn Warren, examined moral dilemmas and human relationships against the backdrop of Southern life, blending modernist techniques with regional themes.

Key figures include:

- William Faulkner (1897–1962)
- Katherine Anne Porter (1890–1980)
- Robert Penn Warren (1905–1989)
- Eudora Welty (1909–2001)

4.2.6 American Drama

American drama evolved significantly during the first half of the twentieth century, moving away from melodrama toward realism and psychological depth. This transformation was driven by playwrights who tried to explore complex human emotions and social tensions rather than rely on superficial plots. Eugene O'Neill pioneered modern American theatre, introducing themes of family conflict, personal failure, and existential despair. His plays

combined naturalistic dialogue with emotional intensity, developing drama into a serious literary art form.

Characteristics of American drama:

- realistic settings and dialogue
- exploration of family dynamics and personal identity
- themes of isolation, failure, and moral responsibility
- psychological complexity and tragic undertones
- departure from melodrama toward modernist techniques

Later playwrights built on O'Neill's innovations, preparing the ground for post-war drama. Tennessee Williams introduced lyrical realism in plays like The Glass Menagerie (1944) and A Streetcar Named Desire (1947), blending poetic language with psychological insight. Arthur Miller examined moral responsibility and social pressures in works such as All My Sons (1947) and Death of a Salesman (1949), offering a critique of the American Dream (VanSpanckeren, 1994; High, 2000). These dramatists transformed American theatre into a mirror of modern life, addressing universal themes through intimate, character-driven narratives.

Key figures include:

- Eugene O'Neill (1888–1953)
- Tennessee Williams (1911–1983)
- Arthur Miller (1915–2005)

4.2.7 Wartime Literature

World War II influenced literature that depicted themes of heroism, trauma, and moral ambiguity. Writers tried to capture the human experience of war, from the chaos of the battlefield to the anxieties of the home front. Fiction and memoirs depicted the psychological impact of combat, while poetry expressed grief, resilience, and the search for meaning. These works rejected romanticised portrayals of war, employing realism and introspection to convey the complexity of human behaviour under extreme conditions. Wartime literature became a record of an era defined by global conflict and ethical dilemmas.

Characteristics of wartime literature:

- realistic portrayal of combat and its psychological effects
- themes of sacrifice, fear, and moral conflict
- exploration of identity and survival under extreme conditions
- use of documentary detail and introspective tone
- rejection of heroic or sentimental narratives

Norman Mailer's The Naked and the Dead (1948) offered a stark depiction of soldiers' lives, blending realism with philosophical reflection. James Jones explored similar themes in From Here to Eternity (1951), while poets like Randall Jarrell conveyed the vulnerability of airmen and the futility of war in works such as "Death of the Ball Turret Gunner." These texts emphasised the fragility of human life and the psychological consequences of violence, marking a shift from earlier patriotic narratives to a more nuanced understanding of war's consequences.

Key figures include:

- Norman Mailer (1923–2007)
- Randall Jarrell (1914–1965)
- James Jones (1921–1977)

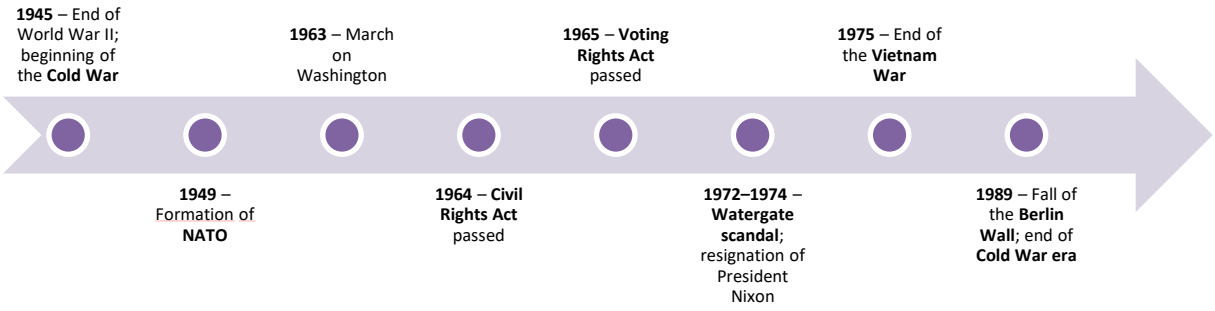
STUDY QUESTIONS & TASKS

- Explain the significance of the Roaring Twenties in terms of economic growth and cultural change.
- What were the causes and consequences of the Great Depression?
- How did the Great Depression shape American literature in the 1930s?
- In what ways did modernist literature challenge traditional forms and values?

- Investigate the role of jazz music in shaping the cultural identity of the 1920s.
- Create a chart showing how major historical events influenced literary movements.

5 THE UNITED STATES IN THE SECOND HALF OF THE 20TH CENTURY (1945–1990)

The second half of the twentieth century was a period of significant transformation for the United States. Emerging from the Second World War as a global superpower, the nation entered an era marked by economic growth, technological innovation, and international leadership. At home, Americans experienced prosperity during the post-war boom but also faced social tensions and movements for civil rights and equality. The Cold War shaped foreign policy and domestic life, influencing politics, culture, and everyday experiences. From the space race to the Vietnam War, these decades were defined by both progress and conflict. Literature of this era reflected the complexity of American society, exploring themes of identity, freedom, and the challenges of modern life. This chapter examines the historical developments and literary trends that shaped American culture between 1945 and 1990.



5.1 Historical Developments and Social Transformations

The years after 1945 brought new challenges and opportunities for the United States. While victory in the Second World War secured its position as a global leader, the nation soon faced ideological rivalry with the Soviet Union, shaping foreign policy and domestic priorities for decades. At home, rapid industrial growth and technological innovation fuelled prosperity, yet social tensions emerged as Americans confronted issues of race, gender, and cultural identity. Political decisions, international conflicts, and grassroots movements all contributed to a dynamic and sometimes turbulent era. Exploring these historical and social transformations helps in understanding the forces that defined American life between 1945 and 1990.

5.1.1 Post-war Era and Early Cold War (1945–1960)

The years immediately following the Second World War marked a turning point for the United States, as the nation emerged as a global superpower. In 1949, the formation of the

North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) signalled a new era of collective security, binding the United States with Western European allies against the threat of Soviet expansion (O'Callaghan, 2006; Cincotta, 1994). At home, cultural life began to change, with innovations such as Polaroid cameras and the introduction of bikinis reflecting a society eager for novelty and leisure. These developments were accompanied by growing confidence in American leadership, both politically and economically. The post-war years thus laid the foundations for a period of prosperity and international influence.

The 1950s are often remembered as a decade of economic growth and optimism. The population exceeded 150 million, and suburbanisation transformed the American landscape, supported by rising incomes and consumer culture. Technological progress brought colour television into homes, while medical breakthroughs such as the polio vaccine improved public health. At the same time, scientific achievements reached new heights with the discovery of the DNA structure in 1953, a milestone that would revolutionise biology. These years were characterised by confidence in progress and stability, yet beneath the surface, social tensions were beginning to emerge. The prosperity of the decade masked inequalities that would soon demand attention.

Despite the image of harmony, the mid-1950s witnessed the first decisive steps towards racial equality. In 1954, the Supreme Court declared segregation in public schools unconstitutional, challenging long-standing practices in the South. The murder of Emmett Till and Rosa Parks' refusal to give up her seat sparked the Montgomery bus boycott, signalling the rise of the civil rights movement. The struggle for equality became one of the defining themes of the era, reshaping American society and inspiring cultural change.

By the late 1950s, the optimism of the decade was tempered by growing international competition. The Soviet launch of Sputnik in 1957 initiated the space race, prompting the creation of NASA and accelerating technological rivalry between the superpowers. At the same time, cultural icons such as Elvis Presley and the publication of Dr Seuss's classics The Cat in the Hat and How the Grinch Stole Christmas! reflected a vibrant popular culture. The admission of Alaska and Hawaii as states in 1959 expanded the nation's borders, while Fidel Castro's rise in Cuba introduced communism to the Western Hemisphere, intensifying Cold War tensions. These developments closed the decade with a mix of achievement and uncertainty, setting the stage for the challenges of the 1960s.

5.1.2 Social Movements and Global Conflicts (1960–1975)

The 1960s opened with heightened Cold War tensions and dramatic cultural shifts. The failed Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961 exposed the fragility of U.S. foreign policy, while the Cuban Missile Crisis a year later brought the world to the brink of nuclear war. At the same time, American popular culture flourished, with icons such as Marilyn Monroe captivating audiences and Andy Warhol redefining art through his Campbell's Soup Can series. The release of the first James Bond film, Dr. No, in 1962 reflected a growing fascination with espionage and glamour. These contrasting developments illustrated a decade shaped by both geopolitical rivalry and cultural innovation.

The struggle for equality reached its peak during the 1960s, transforming the social situation in the United States. The March on Washington in 1963, where Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his historic "I Have a Dream" speech, became a defining moment in the civil rights movement. Legislative victories soon followed, with the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 dismantling institutional segregation and securing voting rights for African Americans (O'Callaghan, 2006; Cincotta, 1994). Alongside these achievements, new movements emerged, including feminism and advocacy for gender equality. These reforms marked a significant shift towards inclusivity, even though the journey was far from complete.

While social activism dominated headlines, the decade also witnessed remarkable cultural and technological milestones. Beatlemania swept across America, signalling a new era in music, while television shows such as Star Trek captured the imagination of millions. The Apollo 11 mission in 1969, culminating in Neil Armstrong's first steps on the moon, symbolised American scientific ambition and global leadership. Woodstock, held in the same year, symbolised the spirit of counterculture and youth rebellion. These events reflected a society negotiating between tradition and transformation, with technology and art reshaping everyday life.

The Vietnam War dominated American politics and society throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, becoming one of the most divisive conflicts in the history of the USA. In this context, Céspedes (2013) emphasises that American involvement began as part of a broader Cold War strategy to contain communism, following the belief in the "domino theory" that the fall of one nation in Southeast Asia would lead to others succumbing to communist influence. Initially, it was limited to financial and military support for South Vietnam. However, the conflict escalated into a full-scale engagement, drawing U.S. troops into a war. The

withdrawal of U.S. troops in 1973 and the fall of Saigon in 1975 marked a bitter end to the conflict. Vietnam left a legacy of mistrust and disillusionment that shaped American foreign policy and public opinion.

Domestic politics also faced its own crisis. The Watergate scandal, beginning with a break-in at the Democratic National Committee headquarters in 1972, exposed a web of illegal activities linked to President Nixon's administration. Persistent investigative journalism revealed attempts to obstruct justice and misuse power, leading to Nixon's resignation in August 1974 – the first one in U.S. history. Combined with economic challenges and social change, Watergate symbolised the end of post-war optimism and the beginning of a more uncertain political climate.

5.1.3 Political and Economic Shifts in a Changing World (1975–1990)

The late 1970s were marked by contrasts between cultural milestones and scientific progress. While the death of Elvis Presley in 1977 symbolised the end of an era in popular music, the release of Star Wars the same year revolutionised cinema and visual storytelling. Advances in medicine were equally significant, with the birth of the first test-tube baby in 1978 signalling a new chapter in reproductive technology. Meanwhile, consumer electronics transformed everyday life as Sony introduced the Walkman, redefining how people experienced music. These developments reflected a society embracing modernity while still rooted in familiar traditions, setting the tone for the dynamic decade ahead.

The 1980s began with political drama and technological breakthroughs. Ronald Reagan's inauguration as president in 1981 signalled a conservative shift in American politics, with an emphasis on free-market policies and a robust defence strategy. His survival of an assassination attempt early in his term further reinforced his image as a resilient leader. Meanwhile, the appointment of Sandra Day O'Connor as the first female Supreme Court Justice represented a significant step towards gender equality, and the launch of MTV and the IBM personal computer signalled a cultural and technological revolution. However, the decade was also marked by challenges, including the AIDS epidemic and growing economic discrepancies. Thus, Reagan's era combined optimism with underlying social tensions.

Despite economic growth and cultural flourishing, the 1980s were marked by global crises and technological disasters. The 1983 bombing of the US Marine barracks in Beirut highlighted the dangers of international terrorism, while the 1986 Challenger explosion and

the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster underscored the risks of scientific ambition. Meanwhile, cultural phenomena such as Michael Jackson's Thriller and the success of E.T. reflected America's dominance in entertainment. Initiatives such as 'We Are the World' demonstrated the power of celebrity activism in addressing global issues. The 1980s revealed a world balancing progress with vulnerability, where triumph and tragedy unfolded side by side.

The closing years of the decade witnessed historic transformations that reshaped global politics. Mikhail Gorbachev's policies of Glasnost and Perestroika accelerated the decline of Soviet influence, culminating in the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the collapse of communist regimes across Eastern Europe. In the United States, George H. W. Bush assumed the presidency as the nation entered a new era of international relations. Technological innovation continued to redefine modern life, with Tim Berners-Lee's invention of the World Wide Web in 1989 laying the foundation for the digital age. The end of the Cold War and the dawn of the information revolution marked a turning point, closing a chapter of ideological conflict and opening one of unprecedented connectivity.

5.2 Literary Movements and Cultural Reflections

The second half of the twentieth century brought significant changes to American literature, mirroring the social and political transformations of the era. The aftermath of the Second World War, the tensions of the Cold War, and the rise of civil rights movements created a background for new voices and experimental forms. Writers questioned traditional narratives, exploring themes of identity, freedom, and cultural diversity in an increasingly complex society. Post-war realism captured the uncertainties of modern life, while the Beat Generation challenged conformity and celebrated individual expression. Later, postmodernism introduced fragmented structures and irony, reflecting a world of shifting values. Minority authors enriched the literary canon with stories of race, gender, and heritage. Literature in this period became a dynamic mirror of American experience, revealing both the optimism and the anxieties of a rapidly changing nation.

5.2.1 Post-war Realism and Existential Concerns

The post-war years in American literature were shaped by a climate of conservatism and the tension between conformity and individuality. Writers of the 1950s explored the struggles of ordinary people in a society that prized material success and social stability. Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman portrayed the tragic consequences of the American Dream, while Tennessee Williams examined psychological vulnerability in plays such as A Streetcar

Named Desire. These works reflected a world in which characters sought meaning and identity against the backdrop of rigid expectations. Literature became a space for questioning values, revealing the fragility of human aspirations in an age of apparent prosperity.

Novelists of the period were deeply engaged with the realities of their time, often depicting protagonists at odds with a world that sought to define them. One of the chief characteristics of these emerging novelists was their engagement with the world around them. Norman Mailer combined social critique with stylistic innovation, signalling a move towards more experimental forms. Although realism remained dominant, writers started to blur boundaries between fiction and commentary, anticipating later developments in narrative technique (VanSpanckeren, 1994; High, 2000). This literature of dissent and introspection captured the complexity of post-war America, balancing traditional storytelling with a growing impulse to challenge convention.

Alongside urban narratives, regional literatures flourished, particularly in the American South. Authors such as Flannery O'Connor infused their works with elements of the grotesque, exploring questions of faith, morality, and human imperfection. These voices contributed to a broader understanding of American identity, emphasising its diversity and contradictions. While the ideal of a unified national essence persisted in the 1950s, literature increasingly acknowledged the multiplicity of experiences shaping the nation. This shift laid the groundwork for the cultural and stylistic transformations that would define the decades to come.

Key themes and characteristics of the period can be characterised as follows:

- focus on ordinary lives and everyday struggles
- conflict between individual identity and social expectations
- moral dilemmas and psychological depth
- realistic settings with symbolic undertones
- growing experimentation within traditional narrative forms
- literature of dissent and introspection

Key figures and literary works include:

- Arthur Miller (1915–2005) – Death of a Salesman (1949)

- Tennessee Williams (1911–1983) – A Streetcar Named Desire (1947), Cat on a Hot Tin Roof (1955)
- Norman Mailer (1923–2007) – The Naked and the Dead (1948)
- Jerome David Salinger (1919– 2010) – The Catcher in the Rye (1951)
- Flannery O'Connor (1925–1964) – Wise Blood (1952), A Good Man Is Hard to Find (1955)

5.2.2 The Beat Generation and Countercultural Voices

The Beat Generation emerged in the 1950s as a group of writers and artists who rejected the materialism and conformity of post-war America. Centred in New York and San Francisco, they sought alternative ways of living and writing, embracing spontaneity, spiritual exploration, and personal freedom. Influenced by Zen Buddhism and the improvisational rhythms of jazz, their works celebrated immediacy and authenticity over polished form. This countercultural movement challenged conventional morality, advocating sexual liberation and experimenting with drugs as a means of expanding consciousness (VanSpanckeren, 1994; High, 2000). The Beats transformed literature into a vehicle for rebellion, shaping a cultural ethos that resonates beyond their time.

Beat literature broke decisively with traditional norms, introducing a raw, colloquial style and rhythms inspired by music. Writers abandoned regular metre and rhyme, employed improvisation and the stream of consciousness to capture the intensity of lived experience. Their vocabulary incorporated slang and street idioms, reflecting a desire to democratise literary expression. The Beats' influence extended into music, inspiring artists from Bob Dylan to The Beatles, and laid the groundwork for the counterculture of the 1960s.

Key themes and characteristics:

- rejection of materialism and social conformity
- celebration of spontaneity and improvisation
- influence of Zen Buddhism and Eastern philosophy
- jazz-inspired rhythms and oral performance
- advocacy of sexual freedom and experimentation with drugs
- use of slang and colloquial language
- stream of consciousness and "Spontaneous Prose"

Although the movement started to dissolve with the deaths of key figures such as Neal Cassady and Jack Kerouac, its ideas endured, evolving into the hippie culture and shaping later artistic forms. Beat writers often faced censorship and legal challenges, most notably the obscenity trial over Allen Ginsberg's Howl, which became a landmark case for freedom of expression. Their works explored taboo subjects, such as drug use, sexuality, and spiritual quest, provoking both admiration and criticism. Today, the Beat Generation is recognised not only for its literary innovation but also for its role in redefining American cultural identity, challenging boundaries between art and life.

Key figures include:

- Jack Kerouac (1922–1969)
- Allen Ginsberg (1926–1997)
- William S. Burroughs (1914–1997)
- Lawrence Ferlinghetti (1919–2021)
- Gregory Corso (1930–2001)

5.2.3 Postmodernism and Literary Experimentation

Postmodernism emerged in the second half of the twentieth century as both a continuation and a critique of modernist aesthetics. While modernism tried to impose order on the chaos of experience through formal experimentation, postmodernism questioned the very possibility of coherence and meaning. It rejected universal truths and employed ambiguity, irony, and playfulness. Rather than striving for interpretation or resolution, postmodern texts foregrounded the constructed nature of reality, blurring the boundaries between high and low culture and fact and fiction. This shift reflected a growing scepticism towards grand narratives and absolute values, marking a radical transformation in literary thought.

Postmodern literature is characterised by fragmentation, intertextuality, and a mixing of genres and media. Authors employed collage, parody, and pastiche to challenge traditional notions of originality and authority. Irony became a dominant mode, mocking attempts to impose order or meaning, while metafiction exposed the artificiality of narrative itself. Reality was presented as unstable and mediated by language, with texts constructing worlds rather than reflecting them. These techniques produced works that were playful yet profound, inviting readers to question assumptions about identity, truth, and representation

(VanSpanckeren, 1994; High, 2000). Postmodernism thus transformed literature into a space of endless possibility and performance.

Postmodernism as a term was introduced in 1971 by Ihab Hassan. He came up with a list of qualities of works of postmodern aesthetic:

- indeterminacy – nothing is fixed, nothing is stable, all manners of ambiguity, ruptures
- fragmentation – is related to the use of such techniques as montage, collage, paradox
- decanonisation – destruction of cannons
- selflessness – there is no real self
- irony and parody – anything can be mocked
- hybridisation – refers to the replication of genres
- carnivalisation – aspiration to convey the comic or the absurdist feeling of postmodernism
- performance –texts should be performed
- constructionism – the text constructs the reality

The rise of postmodernism coincided with cultural changes, including the expansion of mass media and the emergence of the information age. Literature absorbed elements of advertising, cinema, and popular culture, erasing distinctions between high art and everyday life. Characters often appeared fragmented or selfless, reflecting a world in which identity was fluid and roles interchangeable. Far from offering certainty, postmodern texts revelled in indeterminacy, presenting reality as a construct shaped by discourse. This aesthetic of hybridity and irony influenced not only fiction but also drama, poetry, and critical theory, leaving an enduring mark on contemporary thought and artistic practice.

Key figures include:

- Thomas Pynchon (1937–)
- Kurt Vonnegut (1922–2007)
- Don DeLillo (1936–)
- John Barth (1930–2019)
- Donald Barthelme (1931–1989)
- Robert Coover (1932–2018)
- William Gaddis (1922–1998)
- Ishmael Reed (1938–)

5.2.4 Feminist and Jewish Voices

Jewish-American literature in the second half of the twentieth century reflected both the integration of Jewish writers into the mainstream and their engagement with questions of identity, morality, and cultural heritage. While not all works focused explicitly on Jewish themes, many explored the tension between individual aspirations and social expectations, often against the backdrop of historical memory and modern challenges. These authors combined humour and tragedy, realism and symbolism, creating narratives that examined the complexities of belonging in a rapidly changing America (VanSpanckeren, 1994; High, 2000). Their contribution enriched American literature with distinctive voices and perspectives.

Key themes and characteristics:

- search for identity and belonging
- tension between individuality and social norms
- engagement with history and cultural memory
- blend of humour, irony, and tragedy
- moral dilemmas and existential questions
- experimentation with narrative form

Jewish-American writers brought distinctive perspectives to American fiction, blending cultural memory with universal concerns. Saul Bellow's novels, such as Herzog, probe the conflict between private consciousness and social pressures, while Bernard Malamud's works explore suffering and redemption through symbolic narratives. Isaac Bashevis Singer revived the world of Eastern European Jewry, infusing his stories with mysticism and moral depth. Philip Roth challenged conventions with provocative depictions of sexuality and identity, and Vladimir Nabokov, though not Jewish, contributed stylistic brilliance and postmodern playfulness. Together, these authors enriched American literature with voices that were introspective, ironic, and deeply engaged with questions of meaning.

Key figures include:

- Saul Bellow (1915–2005)
- Bernard Malamud (1914–1986)
- Isaac Bashevis Singer (1904–1991)

- Philip Roth (1933–2018)
- Vladimir Nabokov (1899–1977)

The feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s significantly influenced American literature, giving rise to voices that challenged patriarchal norms and explored the complexities of female identity. Writers used fiction, poetry, and essays to articulate experiences of oppression and aspirations for autonomy, often blending personal narrative with political critique. These works questioned traditional roles, addressed themes of sexuality and selfhood, and sought to redefine cultural representations of women (VanSpanckeren, 1994; High, 2000). Feminist literature became both a reflection of social change and a catalyst for further transformation.

Key themes and characteristics:

- exploration of female identity and autonomy
- critique of patriarchal norms and gender inequality
- confessional style and personal narrative
- themes of sexuality, motherhood, and mental health
- political engagement and cultural critique
- experimentation with poetic and narrative forms

Feminist writers employed confessional modes, candid language, and experimental forms to convey the realities of women's lives. Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar exposed the psychological toll of societal expectations, while Adrienne Rich's poetry interrogated structures of power and celebrated female creativity. Betty Friedan's The Feminine Mystique sparked national debate by revealing the dissatisfaction of women confined to domestic roles, and Erica Jong's Fear of Flying broke taboos surrounding female sexuality. These works expanded the boundaries of literary discourse, asserting the legitimacy of women's voices in shaping cultural identity.

Key figures include:

- Sylvia Plath (1932–1963)
- Adrienne Rich (1929–2012)
- Betty Friedan (1921–2006)
- Erica Jong (1942–)

5.2.5 Emerging Minority Voices

The closing decades of the twentieth century witnessed the emergence of new minority voices in American literature. Writers of Chinese, Japanese, and Latin American descent started to articulate experiences shaped by migration, cultural hybridity, and the negotiation of identity. Latino authors, in particular, explored the concept of a hybrid self, reflecting the intersection of languages, traditions, and histories. These narratives challenged monolithic notions of American identity, introducing perspectives that were both local and transnational.

The rise of these voices marked a step towards the heterogeneity that characterises contemporary literature. By addressing themes of displacement, cultural memory, and belonging, minority writers expanded the scope of American fiction and poetry. Their work anticipated later developments, including the celebration of diversity and the blending of genres and media. Although these movements gained significance after 1990, their roots in the 1970s and 1980s signalled a transformation that would redefine the literary canon.

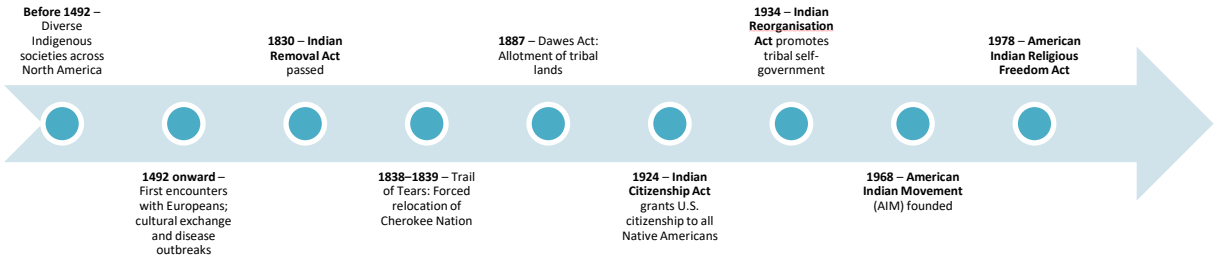
STUDY QUESTIONS & TASKS

- What were the major social movements of the 1960s, and how did they transform American society?
- Identify key technological and cultural milestones of the 1980s and discuss their influence on American identity.
- How did the Beat Generation challenge traditional literary norms and cultural values?
- What are the defining characteristics of postmodern literature, and how do they differ from modernist aesthetics?
- How did feminist literature contribute to redefining cultural representations of women?

- Select one feminist or Jewish-American author mentioned in the chapter and prepare a brief report on how their work addresses issues of identity and cultural heritage.

6 NATIVE AMERICANS

Native Americans have played a foundational yet often marginalised role in the history of the United States. Long before European colonisation, Indigenous societies lived across the continent, sustaining complex political, economic, and cultural systems. The arrival of Europeans initiated various transformations, including territorial dispossession, demographic collapse, and cultural disruption. Federal policies oscillated between removal, assimilation, and recognition, shaping the trajectory of Native life from the colonial era to the late twentieth century. In literature, Native voices evolved from oral traditions to written forms, offering narratives that explore identity, memory, and survival. This chapter examines the historical experiences of Native Americans and considers how their literary contributions have enriched and challenged American cultural discourse.



6.1 Historical Developments and Social Transformations

The history of Native Americans in the United States reflects a complex interplay of continuity and change, marked by resilience in the face of systemic displacement and cultural suppression. From the vibrant societies that existed prior to European contact to the disruptions of colonisation, Native communities have navigated policies of removal, assimilation, and eventual recognition. Their experiences include land loss, forced migration, and struggles for sovereignty. This section traces the historical trajectory of Native Americans from pre-contact societies through the legislative and social developments that shaped their position by the end of the twentieth century.

6.1.1 Native Americans before Colonisation

Prior to European colonisation, North America was inhabited by diverse Indigenous societies with complex social structures. According to VanSpanckeren (1994), these communities ranged from nomadic hunter-gatherer groups on the Great Plains, such as the Lakota and

Cheyenne, to agricultural civilisations like the Mississippian culture, which influenced tribes including the Choctaw and Creek in the Southeast. In the Northeast, the Iroquois Confederacy, comprising nations such as the Mohawks, Senecas, and Onondagas, developed advanced diplomatic systems. Across the Pacific Northwest, tribes like the Haida and Tlingit sustained their economies through fishing and woodworking. This diversity underscores the sophistication of pre-contact Native American life.

Linguistic and cultural diversity was equally rich. Scholars estimate that more than fifty language families existed, encompassing hundreds of distinct languages spoken by tribes such as the Navajo and Hopi in the Southwest, the Ojibwe in the Great Lakes region, and the Cherokee in the Southeast. These linguistic variations reflected deep-rooted cultural identities and shaped oral traditions, which served as sources of historical memory and spiritual knowledge (VanSpanckeren, 1994; High, 2000). Religious systems were generally animistic, emphasising a relationship with nature and the sacredness of land. Governance structures varied, from decentralised bands to confederacies such as the Iroquois League, which demonstrated advanced diplomatic organisation. Such complexity challenges earlier misconceptions that Indigenous societies lacked political or intellectual sophistication.

Economic and technological practices prior to European contact were equally advanced within their ecological contexts. Agricultural innovations included the cultivation of maise, beans, and squash, crops that later transformed global diets. Techniques such as controlled burning and irrigation reflected their understanding of environmental management. Material culture incorporated tools made from stone, bone, and wood, alongside textiles and pottery. Tribes such as the Pueblo in the Southwest constructed elaborate adobe dwellings, while Plains nations developed portable tipis suited to nomadic life. These achievements illustrate that Native American societies were dynamic and adaptive long before external influences (VanSpanckeren, 1994; High, 2000). Recognising this historical depth is essential for interpreting subsequent encounters with Europeans and the disruptions they entailed.

6.1.2 Early Encounters and Cultural Exchange

The initial contact between European settlers and Indigenous people in North America was shaped by curiosity and pragmatic needs. Europeans arrived with technologies unfamiliar to Native communities, including metal tools, firearms, and sailing vessels, which altered traditional patterns of subsistence and warfare. At the same time, Indigenous people introduced Europeans to crops such as maize, beans, and squash, which became staples in

colonial diets. These exchanges were not merely economic, as they influenced settlement strategies and agricultural practices on both sides. The early period of interaction thus established a framework of interdependence that persisted, albeit under increasingly unequal conditions.

Despite the potential for cooperation, the consequences of European arrival were catastrophic for Indigenous populations. Diseases such as smallpox, measles, and influenza spread rapidly among communities with no prior exposure, causing mortality rates that in some regions exceeded 90%. This demographic collapse undermined social structures and weakened resistance to colonial expansion. While some tribes sought alliances to secure trade advantages or military support, these arrangements often proved temporary as European territorial ambitions intensified. The epidemiological impact of colonisation remains one of the most significant demographic transformations in world history, fundamentally altering the balance of power in North America.

Cultural misunderstandings further complicated relations between Europeans and Native Americans. Concepts of land ownership differed profoundly: Indigenous people viewed land as a communal resource, whereas Europeans imposed private property regimes. These divergent worldviews generated conflicts that extended beyond economics, influencing legal frameworks and treaty negotiations for centuries. Language barriers and contrasting spiritual systems added layers of complexity, often leading to misinterpretations of intent in diplomatic exchanges. Although trade networks initially facilitated dialogue, the power asymmetry and competing objectives gradually eroded trust. In retrospect, these early encounters were decisive in shaping the trajectory of colonial policy and Indigenous dispossession.

6.1.3 Displacement and Removal

The gradual loss of Indigenous land in the nineteenth century was driven by expanding settlement and economic ambitions. In this context, Bowes (2015) asserts that early interactions with trappers and traders posed little threat to territorial integrity, as these activities required minimal permanent occupation. However, the westward movement of settlers following the Louisiana Purchase and subsequent land acquisitions intensified pressure on Native territories. To facilitate migration and reduce conflict, the federal government negotiated treaties that permitted settlers to travel through tribal lands in exchange for monetary compensation or goods. These agreements introduced the concept of fixed boundaries, which contrasted sharply with Indigenous notions of communal land use.

Over time, such treaties became instruments for restricting mobility and consolidating control, culminating in the establishment of reservations. This process reflected a broader policy objective: to contain Native populations while securing access to resources for agricultural and commercial development.

The nineteenth century marked a shift in United States policy towards Native Americans, characterised by systematic displacement from ancestral lands. **The Indian Removal Act of 1830** authorised the federal government to negotiate treaties that facilitated the relocation of tribes to territories west of the Mississippi River. Although presented as voluntary agreements, these treaties were frequently coerced, reflecting the imbalance of power between the parties. The policy aimed to open fertile lands in the Southeast for Caucasian settlement, particularly for cotton cultivation, and was justified under the doctrine of "civilising" Indigenous people. This legislative framework laid the foundation for one of the most extensive forced migrations in American history.

The implementation of removal policies had devastating demographic and cultural consequences. The most notorious episode, known as **the Trail of Tears**, involved the forced relocation of the Cherokee Nation between 1838 and 1839. Approximately 16,000 individuals were compelled to march over 1,000 miles to designated Indian Territory, with mortality rates estimated at 25 % due to disease, exposure, and starvation. Similar experiences affected other tribes, including the Choctaw, Chickasaw, Creek, and Seminole, each enduring severe losses during transit (Bowes, 2015). These removals fractured traditional governance structures and disrupted subsistence patterns, accelerating the erosion of cultural continuity across the affected nations.

Following removal, the reservation system became the dominant mechanism for managing Native-American populations. Established through a series of treaties and executive orders, reservations were often located on marginal lands unsuitable for agriculture, limiting economic self-sufficiency. The confinement of tribes to restricted territories curtailed mobility and access to resources, while federal oversight imposed unfamiliar legal and administrative frameworks. Although some communities adapted through new forms of subsistence and governance, the cumulative effect was a significant reduction in autonomy. By the mid-nineteenth century, displacement and reservation policies had transformed Indigenous life, setting the stage for subsequent assimilation initiatives.

6.1.4 Assimilation and Resistance

By the late nineteenth century, federal policy shifted from physical displacement to cultural assimilation, aiming to integrate Native Americans into Euro-American society. **The Dawes Act of 1887** exemplified this approach by dividing communal tribal lands into individual allotments, with the surplus sold to non-Indigenous settlers. This policy sought to dismantle collective landholding and promote private property as a marker of "civilisation". While proponents argued that allotment would encourage agricultural self-sufficiency, its practical effect was the loss of millions of acres of tribal land and the erosion of traditional governance structures.

Education became a central instrument of assimilation through the establishment of boarding schools designed to introduce Euro-American values. Institutions such as the Carlisle Indian Industrial School enforced strict prohibitions on Indigenous languages, spiritual practices, and cultural expressions. Children were often removed from their families and subjected to regimented routines intended to replace tribal identities with those aligned to mainstream society. Although these schools claimed to offer vocational training, they primarily functioned as tools of cultural suppression. The psychological and social consequences of this system were significant, contributing to intergenerational trauma and weakening the transmission of traditional knowledge.

Despite the pressures mentioned in previous parts of the chapter, Native communities demonstrated resilience through various forms of resistance. Some tribes maintained cultural practices covertly, preserving languages and ceremonies in private settings. Others engaged in legal challenges to contest land seizures and assert treaty rights, laying the groundwork for future advocacy movements. Religious revitalisation also emerged as a response, exemplified by the Ghost Dance movement, which sought spiritual restoration amid material dispossession. These strategies underscore the adaptability of Indigenous societies in confronting systemic efforts to destroy their cultural foundations. Assimilation policies, while pervasive, never achieved complete success, as resistance remained integral to Native survival.

6.1.5 Twentieth-Century Struggles and Achievements

The twentieth century introduced significant legislative changes that altered the relationship between Native Americans and the federal government. **The Indian Citizenship Act of 1924** granted U.S. citizenship to all Indigenous peoples, thereby integrating them into the nation's

political framework. However, this measure did not resolve systemic inequalities, as voting rights were often restricted at the state level. In theory, all Native Americans were eligible to vote from 1924 on. In practice, however, many of the same barriers to voting that were used against potential African-American voters were raised for prospective Native American voters. A more substantive reform emerged with **the Indian Reorganisation Act of 1934**, which reversed allotment policies and encouraged tribal self-government. This legislation marked a departure from assimilationist strategies, enabling tribes to adopt constitutions and manage communal resources. Nevertheless, economic challenges persisted, limiting the practical impact of these reforms.

Mid-century policies reflected renewed attempts to curtail tribal sovereignty. **The Termination Policy** of the 1950s sought to dissolve the federal recognition of tribes and transfer jurisdiction to state authorities. Advocates claimed this would promote assimilation and economic independence, yet its consequences included widespread poverty and loss of land. In response, Native activism intensified during the civil rights era. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 has been effective in the expansion of voting rights for marginalised groups, including Native-American citizens of voting age. **The American Indian Movement (AIM)**, founded in 1968, became a prominent voice for Indigenous rights, organising protests to demand enforcement of treaty obligations and an end to systemic discrimination. Events such as the occupation of Alcatraz (1969–1971) and the standoff at Wounded Knee (1973) drew national attention to these issues.

Legislative progress accompanied activism in the latter decades of the century. **The Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975** granted tribes greater authority over health, education, and social services, reinforcing principles of autonomy. Subsequent measures, including **the American Indian Religious Freedom Act (1978)**, affirmed cultural rights and protected traditional practices. By 1990, Native Americans had secured important legal and institutional gains, though disparities in economic development and social welfare remained pronounced. These achievements illustrate a complex trajectory: while federal policy oscillated between assimilation and recognition, Indigenous communities consistently pursued strategies to preserve sovereignty and cultural identity.

6.2 Literary Movements and Cultural Reflections

Native American literature represents a continuum of cultural expression that spans from Native American oral tradition to contemporary written forms. Initially transmitted through

myths, legends, and ceremonial narratives, the stories preserved collective memory and spiritual values within Indigenous communities. The transition to written literature occurred under conditions of historical change, including displacement and assimilation, yet Native voices adapted to new media while retaining distinctive cultural perspectives. Throughout the twentieth century, literary movements such as the Native American Renaissance articulated themes of identity, survival, and resistance, challenging dominant narratives of American history. This section explores the evolution of Native American literature, examining its major forms, thematic concerns, and contributions to the broader landscape of American cultural discourse.

6.2.1 Native-American Oral Tradition and First Written Records

Native-American oral tradition can be characterised as the earliest form of American literary expression, predating European colonisation by centuries. This body of work encompassed myths, legends, ceremonial chants, and narratives transmitted orally across generations. Far from being uniform, these traditions varied significantly among tribes, reflecting distinct cosmologies and social structures. Oral literature functioned as a source of cultural knowledge, embedding moral codes, historical memory, and spiritual principles within narrative frameworks. Elders played a central role in preserving and transmitting these stories, which were often performed in accordance with seasonal cycles and ritual contexts. Such practices ensured continuity of cultural identity in the absence of written texts.

The thematic core of Native oral narratives reveals an interconnection between humanity and the natural world. Stories frequently portrayed nature as both a physical and spiritual mother, emphasising reciprocal responsibilities between humans and other living beings. Tribal heroes and trickster figures, such as Iktomi among the Lakota, served as vehicles for moral instruction and social commentary. While humour and irony were common devices, narratives also conveyed values of truth, balance, and communal responsibility. These elements illustrate that oral literature was not merely entertainment but a system of cultural education, shaping ethical norms and collective worldviews.

Linguistic diversity further enriched the complexity of oral traditions. With more than fifty language families and hundreds of distinct languages, Native American storytelling was variable in style, symbolism, and interpretation. The absence of a shared literary heritage meant that narratives were culturally specific, and even translations of similar stories could differ substantially in meaning. For instance, the figure of Iktomi might appear as a spider in

one tribal context and as a coyote in another, reflecting local ecological and spiritual associations. This variability underscores the importance of situating oral literature within its tribal context to avoid reductive generalisations.

Characteristic features of Native-American oral literature

- absence of written tradition prior to European contact
- transmission of knowledge through myths, legends, songs, and ceremonial narratives
- strong emphasis on nature as a spiritual and physical entity
- presence of tribal heroes and trickster figures
- cultural specificity – narratives vary across tribes
- seasonal and ritual context for storytelling
- didactic function – conveying values, humour, truth, and history
- rich linguistic diversity – over fifty language families

The transition from oral to written forms occurred gradually under conditions of cultural change. In this context, Lundquist (2004) argues that early transcriptions were often produced by ethnographers and missionaries, whose interpretations sometimes differed from original meanings. Nevertheless, these efforts preserved fragments of oral heritage that might otherwise have been lost. In the twentieth century, Native authors started to reclaim and adapt traditional narratives within written literature, integrating them into novels, poetry, and essays. This process not only safeguarded cultural memory but also asserted Indigenous perspectives within the broader canon of American literature. The continuity between oral and written traditions remains a defining feature of Native literary expression.

Early mediators of oral tradition into written form:

- Charles Eastman (Ohiyesa) (1858–1939) – Dakota physician and writer who documented Native traditions
- Francis La Flesche (1857–1932) – Omaha ethnographer preserving oral narratives
- Ella Cara Deloria (1889–1971) – Yankton Dakota scholar and linguist, recorded Sioux oral traditions

6.2.2 Native American Renaissance (1960s–1980s)

The term “Native American Renaissance” is commonly used to describe the literary production by Indigenous authors beginning in the late 1960s, although its applicability

remains debated among scholars. This movement signalled a transition from ethnographic representation to self-authored narratives that foregrounded Native perspectives. Navarre Scott Momaday's House Made of Dawn (1968), awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1969, is widely regarded as the catalyst for this development. The novel's success demonstrated the viability of Native literature within mainstream publishing, inspiring subsequent generations of writers to articulate experiences rooted in tribal identity and historical consciousness.

Characteristic features can be characterised as follows:

- revival of oral traditions: incorporation of myths, legends, and ceremonial narratives
- exploration of cultural identity and intergenerational trauma
- engagement with historical and political contexts: colonisation, activism, sovereignty
- emphasis on nature and land as central to spiritual and cultural continuity
- innovative narrative techniques: non-linear storytelling, multiple viewpoints, genre hybridity
- use of bilingual elements and code-switching in some texts

Texts associated with the Renaissance often depict the complexities of life in reservation communities, addressing themes of poverty, dislocation, and cultural fragmentation. Lincoln (1983) emphasises that protagonists are frequently portrayed as marginalised individuals navigating the tensions between traditional values and modern realities. While these narratives acknowledge social hardship, they also incorporate humour, irony, and compassion, offering nuanced portrayals of Indigenous humanity. Authors employed innovative narrative strategies, including non-linear structures, multiple perspectives, and intertextual references to oral traditions. Such techniques enabled the integration of mythic elements with contemporary settings, reinforcing continuity between past and present.

The thematic scope of the movement extends beyond individual experience to encompass collective struggles for identity and sovereignty. Many texts interrogate historical injustices, including colonisation and assimilation policies, while engaging with contemporary political issues such as activism and cultural revitalisation. A recurrent motif is the spiritual and ecological relationship to land, reflecting Indigenous cosmologies and ethical frameworks. By situating personal narratives within broader historical and environmental contexts, these texts challenge dominant paradigms of American literature and assert the legitimacy of Native

epistemologies (Lincoln, 1983; Lundquist, 2004). The Renaissance thus represents both a literary and cultural reclamation.

Key figures include:

- Navarre Scott Momaday (1934–2024)
- Leslie Marmon Silko (1948–)
- James Welch (1940–2003)
- Louise Erdrich (1954–)
- Sherman Alexie (1966–)

6.2.3 Contemporary Voices and Cultural Identity (1980s–1990)

By the 1980s, Native American literature had entered a phase of consolidation and diversification, marked by the emergence of new voices and the expansion of thematic concerns. Authors continued to draw on oral traditions while experimenting with modernist and postmodernist techniques, creating narratives that bridged cultural heritage and contemporary realities. This period witnessed increased representation of female perspectives, addressing issues of gender alongside identity and sovereignty. Writers such as Louise Erdrich foregrounded intergenerational narratives that explored the complexities of family, memory, and cultural continuity within Ojibwe communities (Lundquist, 2004). These developments signalled a broadening of Native literary discourse beyond the confines of earlier Renaissance themes.

Characteristic features can be characterised as follows:

- integration of oral traditions with modern narrative forms
- exploration of hybrid identities and cultural negotiation
- prominent female voices and gendered perspectives
- continued emphasis on land, spirituality, and environmental ethics
- formal experimentation: fragmented chronology, multiple narrators, intertextuality
- engagement with historical and contemporary political issues

Thematically, works of the late twentieth century interrogated the intersections of history, politics, and personal experience. Novels and poetry frequently engaged with legacies of colonisation and assimilation while situating characters within dynamic social contexts. A recurrent motif was the negotiation of hybrid identities, reflecting the tension between tribal

affiliation and participation in mainstream society. Environmental ethics and spiritual relationships with the land remained central, yet were reframed in light of contemporary challenges. By embedding these concerns within complex narrative structures, authors asserted the adaptability and resilience of Indigenous worldviews in modern settings.

Stylistically, Native literature embraced formal innovation, incorporating fragmented chronology, polyphonic voices, and intertextual references to oral traditions. Louise Erdrich's Love Medicine (1984) exemplifies this trend through its mosaic structure and shifting perspectives. Poets such as Joy Harjo revitalised Indigenous poetics by blending lyrical intensity with political critique, as seen in collections like She Had Some Horses (1983). These works not only expanded the thematic and aesthetic range of Native literature but also secured its place within the broader canon of American literature.

Key figures include:

- Louise Erdrich (1954–)
- Joy Harjo (1951–)
- Simon J. Ortiz (1941–)
- Paula Gunn Allen (1939–2008)

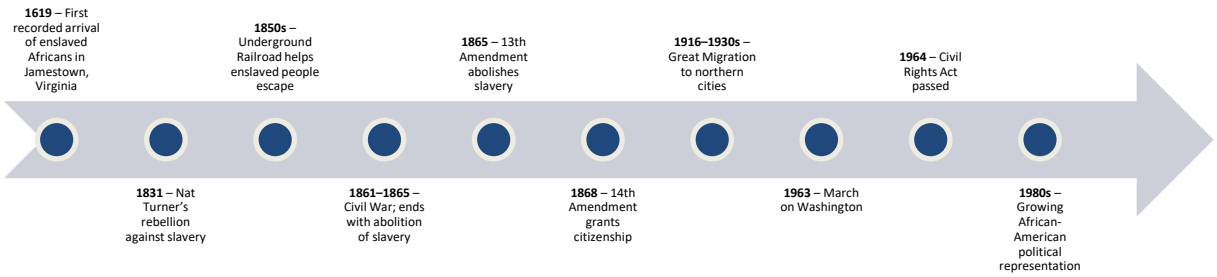
STUDY QUESTIONS & TASKS

- Describe the diversity of Native American societies before European colonisation in terms of social, linguistic, and economic structures.
- Explain the significance of the Indian Removal Act of 1830 and its impact on Indigenous communities.
- What are the defining characteristics of Native-American oral tradition, and how did it function within tribal societies?
- Discuss the significance of the Native American Renaissance and its role in reclaiming cultural identity.

- Write a comparative analysis of Native-American oral tradition and postmodern literary techniques. How do both question dominant cultural paradigms?

7 AFRICAN AMERICANS IN AMERICAN HISTORY

African Americans have played a central yet often contested role in the history of the United States. From the forced migration and enslavement of millions during the colonial era to the long struggle for freedom and equality, their experience reflects both the darkest chapters and the most transformative movements in American society. The legacy of slavery, the fight for emancipation, and the ongoing pursuit of civil rights shaped not only political and social structures but also cultural identity. African-American voices in literature emerged as instruments of resistance, expression, and creativity, offering insight into themes of oppression, resilience, and hope. This chapter explores the historical trajectory of African Americans in the United States and examines how their literary contributions have influenced and enriched American culture.



7.1 Historical Developments and Social Transformations

The history of African Americans in the United States is a story of resilience and transformation, marked by both oppression and progress. From the forced migration and enslavement of millions during the colonial era to the long struggle for civil rights, African Americans have shaped the nation's political, social, and cultural landscape. Their experiences reflect some of the darkest chapters in American history, including slavery and segregation, as well as moments of significant change, such as emancipation and the Civil Rights Movement. This section traces the historical journey of African Americans from their arrival in the seventeenth century to the social and political developments of the late twentieth century.

7.1.1 Origins and Enslavement (1619–1776)

The origins of African slavery in North America date back to the early 17th century, when European settlers sought a reliable source of labour for their expanding colonies. Initially,

many colonists relied on indentured servants from Europe, but this system proved costly and limited. To meet growing agricultural demands, they turned to enslaved Africans, who were forcibly transported across the Atlantic in what became known as the Middle Passage. According to O'Callaghan (2006), in 1619, the first recorded group of twenty African captives arrived in Jamestown, Virginia, marking the beginning of a system that shaped American society for centuries. These individuals were treated as property rather than people, and their status soon became hereditary. This event laid the foundation for an institution that became deeply rooted in the economic and social fabric of the colonies.

After 1619, slavery spread rapidly throughout the American colonies. By the late 17th century, colonial legislatures passed laws that defined enslaved Africans as chattel, stripping them of all legal rights and making slavery a permanent condition. The transatlantic slave trade intensified during the 18th century, with historians estimating that six to seven million Africans were brought to the New World during this period. The journey across the Atlantic was brutal: overcrowded ships, disease, and violence claimed countless lives. Those who survived faced lifelong servitude under harsh conditions (O'Callaghan, 2006; Cincotta, 1994). Slavery became not only an economic system but also a social order based on racial hierarchy. The expansion of slavery created a rigid racial structure that influenced American society for generations.

Although slavery existed in all thirteen colonies, its economic significance varied greatly between regions. In the North, where commerce and small-scale farming dominated, slavery played a relatively minor role, and enslaved people often worked in households or artisanal trades. In contrast, the South developed a plantation economy centred on tobacco, rice, and later cotton, which relied heavily on enslaved labour. This dependence on slavery fuelled economic growth but also entrenched political and cultural systems that defended the institution. Southern elites viewed slavery as essential to their prosperity and way of life, creating a stark divide between North and South. These regional differences foreshadowed the deep conflicts that later culminated in the Civil War.

7.1.2 Slavery and the Antebellum South (1776–1865)

After the American Revolution, the contradiction between the ideals of liberty and the reality of slavery became increasingly evident. While independence brought freedom for Caucasian Americans, millions of African Americans remained enslaved, and their struggle for liberty continued. The American Revolution introduced new ideas about freedom and equality,

prompting some colonists to question the morality of slavery. While northern states gradually abolished slavery, the southern economy grew ever more dependent on enslaved labour. The invention of the cotton gin in 1793 revolutionised agriculture, making cotton the dominant crop and intensifying the demand for enslaved workers. By the mid-19th century, millions of African Americans were held in bondage, forming the backbone of the South's plantation system (O'Callaghan, 2006; Cincotta, 1994). This economic reliance on slavery deepened sectional divisions.

Despite harsh conditions and severe punishment, enslaved people resisted their oppression in numerous ways, ranging from subtle acts of defiance to organised revolts. Everyday resistance included working slowly, feigning illness, or preserving African cultural traditions through music and storytelling. These acts, though small, asserted a sense of identity and autonomy. More dramatic forms of resistance took the shape of uprisings, the most notable being **Nat Turner's rebellion** in August 1831. Turner, a deeply religious enslaved man, led a revolt in Virginia that resulted in the deaths of dozens of white southerners. Although swiftly suppressed, the rebellion terrified slaveholders and prompted harsher laws restricting the movement, assembly, and education of enslaved people. Turner's uprising revealed both the desperation of the enslaved and the underlying fragility of the system that sought to control them.

The early abolitionist movement gained prominence in the first half of the 19th century, fuelled by moral, religious, and humanitarian arguments against slavery. Enslaved individuals sought freedom through escape, often aided by **the Underground Railroad** – a secret network of safe houses and routes stretching across the North. This system relied on the bravery of free African Americans and sympathetic Caucasians who risked imprisonment or death to assist fugitives. Prominent voices such as Frederick Douglass, a formerly enslaved man who became an eloquent writer and speaker, and William Lloyd Garrison, editor of The Liberator, demanded immediate emancipation and equality. Their activism challenged political compromises that aimed to preserve the Union while maintaining slavery (Cincotta, 1994). The growing abolitionist sentiment intensified sectional tensions and made slavery the defining issue in American politics.

By the 1850s, the debate over slavery dominated national discourse and fractured the political landscape. Legislative efforts such as the Missouri Compromise and the Kansas-Nebraska Act attempted to balance the interests of free and slave states but ultimately deepened divisions.

Violence erupted in “Bleeding Kansas,” where pro-slavery and anti-slavery settlers clashed over the future of the territory. In 1852, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel Uncle Tom’s Cabin influenced public opinion in the North by exposing the brutal realities of slavery, while Southern leaders condemned it as propaganda. As southern states characterised slavery as essential to their economy and culture, talk of secession grew louder. The antebellum period ended with the outbreak of the Civil War, a conflict rooted in the unresolved question of slavery and the nation’s struggle over its identity.

7.1.3 Emancipation and Reconstruction (1865–1877)

The Civil War, fought between 1861 and 1865, was the bloodiest conflict in American history and ultimately determined the fate of slavery in the United States. Rooted in deep divisions over the expansion of slavery into western territories, the war pitted the industrial North against the agrarian South. Northern opposition to the extension of slavery into the new western territories led many Southerners to fear that the existence of slavery was in danger. The Civil War started in 1861 and ended in 1865. It was the four-year war between the United States and 11 Southern states that seceded from the Union and formed the Confederate States of America. When the Union emerged victorious, the institution of slavery was formally abolished through the Thirteenth Amendment. For millions of African Americans, emancipation represented a monumental turning point, offering the promise of freedom after centuries of bondage. The end of the Civil War marked the beginning of a new era, but the challenges of true equality were only beginning.

The Reconstruction Era (1865–1877) sought to reintegrate the Southern states into the Union and redefine the status of African Americans. Congress passed three landmark amendments: the Thirteenth abolished slavery, the Fourteenth granted citizenship and equal protection under the law, and the Fifteenth secured voting rights for African American men. These measures were revolutionary, laying the legal foundation for civil rights. However, implementing these changes proved difficult, as Southern resistance remained strong. Federal troops were stationed in the South to enforce new laws, but their presence was temporary. Although Reconstruction introduced progressive legislation, its success depended on enforcement, which weakened over time.

Despite constitutional reforms, African Americans faced enormous obstacles during Reconstruction. Many formerly enslaved individuals lacked land, education, and economic resources, forcing them into sharecropping arrangements that often resembled slavery in

practice. The Southern economy, devastated by war, relied heavily on this exploitative system. At the same time, white supremacist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan used violence and intimidation to suppress African-American political participation. These challenges underscored the fragility of freedom and highlighted the gap between legal rights and lived reality. Economic dependency and racial violence ensured that equality remained elusive for African Americans in the post-war South.

By the end of Reconstruction, federal commitment to protecting African-American rights had waned. Southern states introduced Black Codes, which restricted freedoms and laid the groundwork for Jim Crow laws enforcing racial segregation. By the 1880s, most Southern states mandated separate schools for African-American and Caucasian children, and by 1900, segregation extended to public transport, restaurants, theatres, and other facilities. These laws institutionalised racial inequality for decades, reversing many of the gains achieved during Reconstruction. The promise of emancipation was undermined by systemic discrimination, shaping the social order of the South well into the twentieth century.

7.1.4 The Era of Segregation and Migration (1877–1940)

In response to widespread racial violence and discrimination, the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) was founded in 1909 by W.E.B. Du Bois and other activists. Established in Chicago, the organisation quickly grew, reaching over 400 branches by 1921. Its mission was to secure political, educational, social, and economic equality for African Americans and to eliminate racial hatred. Through legal challenges, public campaigns, and advocacy, the NAACP became one of the most influential civil rights organisations in American history (O'Callaghan, 2006; Cincotta, 1994). The NAACP provided a powerful voice for African Americans during an era of segregation and laid the groundwork for future civil rights victories.

Nearly fifty years after the Civil War, most African Americans still lived in the rural South, facing poverty and racial oppression. The outbreak of the First World War created new opportunities in northern cities, prompting a mass movement known as **the Great Migration**. Thousands left the South in search of jobs, education, and greater social freedom. Cities such as Chicago, Detroit, and New York became major destinations, with Harlem emerging as a vibrant African-American community. While the North offered more opportunities than the South, migrants still encountered racism, overcrowding, and restrictive housing policies. The

Great Migration transformed the demographic and cultural landscape of the United States, paving the way for new forms of African-American expression.

The Harlem Renaissance, also known as the New Negro Movement, was a cultural awakening that flourished from the end of the First World War through the 1930s. Centred in Harlem, New York City, this movement celebrated African-American art, literature, and music, challenging stereotypes and promoting racial pride. Writers alongside jazz musicians redefined American culture and asserted the intellectual and artistic contributions of African Americans. The Harlem Renaissance not only integrated black and white cultural spheres but also laid the foundation for the Civil Rights Movement of the mid-twentieth century. This cultural revolution reshaped perceptions of African-American identity and marked a turning point in the nation's cultural history.

7.1.5 Civil Rights Movement and Social Change (1940–1970)

The Second World War marked a turning point for African Americans, as their participation in the armed forces and wartime industries challenged the contradictions of democracy and segregation. Over one million African Americans served in the military, while many others worked in defence factories, demanding fair treatment and equal pay. This experience fostered a growing sense of empowerment and laid the groundwork for post-war activism. Returning veterans expected the freedoms they had fought for abroad to be honoured at home, creating pressure for social change. World War II exposed the hypocrisy of racial discrimination and ignited a new determination to achieve civil rights.

In 1955, two significant events marked the beginning of significant changes in American society. The brutal murder of 14-year-old Emmett Till in Mississippi shocked the nation and became a significant event that shaped the Civil Rights Movement. Till, visiting from Chicago, was accused of offending a Caucasian woman and was savagely beaten and killed by two Caucasian men. Photographs published in national magazines provoked outrage and galvanised activists across the country. The acquittal of Till's killers by an all-white jury highlighted the deep injustice of the legal system. Later in 1955, Rosa Parks refused to surrender her seat to a Caucasian passenger on a segregated bus in Montgomery, Alabama. According to Glennon (1991), her quiet act of defiance sparked the Montgomery Bus Boycott, a year-long protest that affected the city's transport system and demonstrated the power of collective action. The boycott brought national attention to the issue of segregation and introduced a young Baptist minister, Martin Luther King Jr., as a prominent leader. Through

speeches and organisation, King promoted non-violent resistance inspired by Mahatma Gandhi. The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the murder of Emmett Till marked the beginning of a mass movement that reshaped American society.

Throughout the 1960s, Martin Luther King Jr. emerged as the moral voice of the Civil Rights Movement. Advocating non-violence and civil disobedience, King led campaigns against segregation and economic injustice. His leadership culminated in the 1963 March on Washington, where over 250,000 people gathered to demand jobs and freedom. King's iconic "I Have a Dream" speech articulated a vision of racial harmony that resonated worldwide. Despite facing arrests, threats, and violence, King remained committed to peaceful protest until his assassination in 1968. King's message of equality and justice became a defining legacy of the Civil Rights era.

The sustained activism of the Civil Rights Movement achieved legislative victories. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawed segregation in public facilities and banned discrimination in employment, while the Voting Rights Act of 1965 guaranteed African Americans the right to vote. These laws represented historic progress, yet challenges persisted. By the late 1960s, frustration with slow change and economic inequality gave rise to the Black Power movement, championed by figures such as Malcolm X and the Black Panthers. This shift reflected a broader struggle for dignity and self-determination. The Civil Rights Movement transformed American law and society, but the quest for equality continued beyond the 1970s.

7.1.6 Post-Civil Rights Era (1970–1990)

The decades following the Civil Rights Movement brought significant progress for African Americans, yet deep inequalities remained. Legal segregation had ended, and voting rights were secured, allowing greater political participation. Many African Americans entered universities and professional careers, contributing to the growth of an African-American middle class. However, economic disparities persisted, particularly in urban areas where poverty, unemployment, and inadequate housing were widespread. Structural racism continued to limit opportunities, and tensions between communities and law enforcement often erupted into violence. The post-Civil Rights era revealed that legal equality did not automatically translate into social and economic justice.

During the 1970s and 1980s, African Americans achieved notable gains in political representation. Figures such as Shirley Chisholm, the first African-American woman elected

to Congress, and Jesse Jackson, who ran for the Democratic presidential nomination in the 1980s, symbolised new possibilities for leadership. Local politics also saw progress, with African Americans elected as mayors in major cities like Atlanta, Detroit, and Chicago. These developments reflected growing political influence, yet national power remained elusive, and systemic barriers continued to shape outcomes (O'Callaghan, 2006). The rise in the number of African-American leaders signalled progress, but full political equality remained a distant goal.

Despite progress, the late 20th century brought new challenges, including economic decline in inner cities, rising crime rates, and debates over affirmative action. Activists continued to fight for equality in education, employment, and housing, while organisations like the NAACP remained influential. Jesse Jackson's Rainbow Coalition sought to unite marginalised groups and advocate for social justice, reflecting a broader vision of equality. These efforts underscored the complexity of racial issues in a society still grappling with its legacy of discrimination. The post-Civil Rights era demonstrated that the struggle for equality was ongoing, requiring renewed activism and commitment.

7.2 Literary Movements and Cultural Reflections

African-American literature offers a lens through which the struggles, hopes, and achievements of a people who have endured centuries of injustice can be understood while asserting their identity and creativity. From early slave narratives that exposed the brutality of bondage to the cultural expressions of the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement, African-American authors have influenced the American literary canon. Their works explore themes of freedom, race, identity, and resilience, challenging stereotypes and redefining the meaning of equality. This section examines the evolution of African-American literature and its role in shaping both national culture and global perspectives.

7.2.1 Slave Narratives

African-American literature emerged under conditions of severe oppression, where the written word became a tool of resistance and self-definition. From the eighteenth century onwards, African-American writers used literature not merely as an artistic expression but as a political act aimed at challenging slavery and racial injustice. These texts combined personal testimony with a collective voice, creating a tradition that spoke to both survival and hope. Understanding this historical framework is essential for grasping the significance of the

earliest works, known as slave narratives. They laid the foundation for a literary heritage that continues to shape American culture.

Slavery in the United States denied humanity to millions, and literary testimonies by former slaves became one of the most powerful instruments against this system. Slave narratives offered an unfiltered view of life in bondage, exposing its brutality and moral contradictions. Frederick Douglass's Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass (1845) portrayed literacy as a path to freedom, while Harriet Jacobs's Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (1861) revealed the gendered dimensions of enslavement. These works blended personal experience with a moral appeal to readers, making them central to the abolitionist movement. Their strength lay in truthfulness and emotional intensity, which resonated far beyond their immediate context.

Common themes in their literary works can be characterised as follows:

- autobiographical structure and first-person perspective
- emphasis on literacy as a path to freedom
- detailed accounts of brutality and dehumanisation under slavery
- moral and religious appeals to Christian values
- advocacy for abolition and human rights
- gender-specific experiences
- contrast between bondage and the ideal of liberty

Although rooted in personal experience, slave narratives were carefully crafted to persuade. Writers employed rhetorical strategies such as contrasts between cruelty and hope, an emphasis on education as liberation, and religious imagery that appealed to Christian morality. Circulated through abolitionist networks, these texts became part of a broader campaign against slavery and helped shape public opinion. Their impact was profound: they influenced political discourse and prepared the ground for the Civil War. In literary terms, they established key themes, such as authenticity, resilience and justice, which echoed throughout African-American writing for generations.

Key figures include:

- Frederick Douglass (1818–1895)
- Harriet Jacobs (1813–1897)
- Olaudah Equiano (c.1745–1797)

- William Wells Brown (1814–1884

7.2.2 Post-Emancipation and Reconstruction Era

The abolition of slavery in 1865 marked a turning point in African-American history, yet freedom did not immediately transform into equality. Literature of the Reconstruction era reflected both hope and disillusionment as newly emancipated individuals sought education and social integration. Writers explored themes of racial uplift, moral responsibility and the challenges of citizenship in a society still shaped by prejudice. This period laid the groundwork for a cultural identity that balanced optimism with realism, anticipating the struggles of the Jim Crow era. Through poetry, essays and fiction, African-American voices asserted their presence in the national discourse.

Characteristic features of literary works can be characterised as follows:

- focus on racial uplift and moral responsibility
- exploration of freedom versus systemic oppression
- emphasis on education and social progress
- use of poetry, essays and early novels as reformist tools
- dialect poetry as cultural affirmation
- intersection of race, gender and class

Among the most influential figures of this era was Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, whose work combined literary artistry with social activism. Her novel Iola Leroy (1892) addressed issues of race, gender and class, presenting educated African-American characters as agents of progress. Harper's poetry and essays emphasised moral integrity and community responsibility, aligning with the ideals of racial uplift promoted by organisations such as the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Paul Laurence Dunbar emerged as a pioneering poet whose mastery of both standard English and African-American dialect brought national recognition. Collections such as Lyrics of Lowly Life (1896) captured the complexity of the African-American experience, blending humour, pathos and cultural pride.

The Reconstruction era was a time of negotiation between freedom and constraint, aspiration and systemic racism. Literature from this period articulated the desire for progress while acknowledging persistent barriers, setting the stage for future movements. Its emphasis on education, moral uplift and cultural pride led to the Harlem Renaissance, in which African-American creativity reached unprecedented heights. Thus, the post-emancipation years were

not merely transitional. They were formative in shaping the themes and strategies of African-American literary expression.

Key figures include:

- Frances E.W. Harper (1825–1911)
- Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872–1906)
- Charles W. Chesnutt (1858–1932)

7.2.3 Harlem Renaissance

The Harlem Renaissance emerged in the aftermath of the First World War, shaped by the Great Migration that brought thousands of African Americans from the rural South to northern cities in search of work, education and economic opportunity. Harlem, a district in New York City, became the cultural centre of this movement. The Harlem Renaissance, often called the New Negro Movement, extended beyond literature to music, visual arts and intellectual life, redefining how African-American identity was perceived nationally and internationally. Its influence resonated far beyond the 1930s, laying the foundation for later civil rights struggles.

Characteristic features can be characterised as follows:

- celebration of African-American heritage and racial pride
- use of folk traditions, spirituals and blues as artistic sources
- exploration of alienation, marginality and urban experience
- assertion of a "New Negro" identity and cultural autonomy
- integration of modernist aesthetics with African-American cultural forms
- intellectual debates on authenticity versus assimilation

The Harlem Renaissance was not merely a literary phenomenon. Writers, musicians and artists drew inspiration from folk traditions, spirituals and the blues, blending these elements with modernist aesthetics. Themes of alienation, marginality and racial pride permeated the works of this era, alongside a celebration of African roots and urban sophistication. Jazz and blues became defining sounds, with figures such as Louis Armstrong and Billie Holiday shaping the musical landscape (Gates & McKay, 2004). This artistic flowering challenged stereotypes and asserted the intellectual and creative vitality of African Americans.

Central to the Harlem Renaissance were writers who articulated a new sense of racial consciousness. Langston Hughes focused on the beauty of African-American life through poetry, while Zora Neale Hurston explored folklore and cultural identity in her fiction. James Weldon Johnson, Countee Cullen and Nella Larsen contributed works that examined race, gender and modernity. Yet the movement was not without tensions. Some intellectuals adopted the manners of Caucasian elites, raising questions about authenticity and assimilation (VanSpanckeren, 1994; High, 2000). Despite these debates, the literature of Harlem established significant themes of pride, resilience and artistic autonomy.

Major authors include:

- Langston Hughes (1902–1967)
- Zora Neale Hurston (1891–1960)
- James Weldon Johnson (1871–1938)
- Countee Cullen (1903–1946)
- Nella Larsen (1891–1964)

7.2.4 Mid-20th Century and the Civil Rights Movement

The mid-twentieth century witnessed the rise of the Civil Rights Movement, a struggle against segregation and racial discrimination that reshaped American society. African-American literature during this period reflected the urgency of social change while employing new artistic forms. Writers addressed the realities of Jim Crow laws, urban migration and the psychological toll of racism, using fiction and essays as platforms for critique. This era marked a shift from the optimism of the Harlem Renaissance to a more confrontational tone, blending realism with modernist experimentation. Literature became inseparable from activism, giving voice to the demand for equality and justice.

Characteristic features of literary texts can be characterised as follows:

- confrontation with systemic racism and segregation
- protest literature as a form of social critique
- exploration of identity, invisibility and existential dilemmas
- integration of modernist techniques and psychological realism
- literature as both art and activism

Richard Wright's works exemplified the protest tradition, using narrative as a weapon against injustice. Wright's influence extended beyond literature, inspiring debates on race, class and the role of art in political struggle. While Wright foregrounded social critique, Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin introduced greater psychological and philosophical depth. Their works transcended protest, situating African-American experience within universal questions of freedom and human dignity. Both authors asserted that literature could illuminate both the inner life and the public struggle.

Key figures include:

- Richard Wright (1908–1960)
- Ralph Ellison (1914–1994)
- James Baldwin (1924–1987)

7.2.5 Black Arts Movement

The Black Arts Movement emerged in the mid-1960s as the cultural branch of the Black Power movement, advocating for art that was unapologetically political and rooted in African-American identity. Founded by Amiri Baraka, who opened the Black Arts Repertory Theatre in Harlem in 1965, the movement sought to create a distinct African-American aesthetic that rejected assimilation into mainstream culture. Its influence quickly spread beyond New York to cities such as Chicago, Detroit and San Francisco, transforming literature, theatre and visual arts into instruments of empowerment. This radical vision positioned art as a weapon in the struggle for liberation.

The movement's most significant impact was felt in poetry and theatre, where writers experimented with form and language to express anger, pride and resistance. Works often celebrated African-American masculinity and cultural heritage, while challenging systemic racism and historical oppression. However, this militancy sometimes produced texts criticised as sexist, homophobic or anti-Semitic, revealing tensions within the movement's ideology (Gates & McKay, 2004). Despite these controversies, the Black Arts Movement expanded the boundaries of African-American creativity, inspiring new voices and reshaping the cultural landscape of the United States.

Characteristic features can be characterised as follows:

- art as a political weapon and expression of African-American pride
- rejection of assimilation into mainstream (white) culture

- emphasis on theatre and poetry as vehicles for activism
- celebration of African heritage and masculinity
- radical aesthetics and experimental forms
- controversies over sexism, homophobia and anti-Semitism
- institutionalisation of African-American studies in academia

By 1971, internal divisions and changing political priorities led to the movement's fragmentation. The Black Arts Movement declined by the early 1970s, partly due to ideological shifts towards Marxism and the mainstream success of its leading figures, its influence endured in subsequent generations of African-American writers.

Key figures include:

- Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) (1934–2014)
- Nikki Giovanni (1943–2024)
- Sonia Sanchez (1934–)
- Ishmael Reed (1938–)
- Alice Walker (1944–)

7.2.6 Post-1970 African American Literature

After the radicalism of the Black Arts Movement, African-American literature entered a phase of diversification and artistic maturity. Writers of the 1970s and 1980s explored themes beyond political militancy, focusing on personal identity, gender, family and historical memory. This period witnessed the rise of African-American women as major literary voices, challenging patriarchal norms and redefining cultural narratives. Novels, poetry and drama contained complex structures and psychological depth, signalling a shift towards postmodern aesthetics (Gates & McKay, 2004). Literature became a space for negotiating race, gender and class in ways that resonated both nationally and globally.

Characteristic features of literary texts can be characterised as follows:

- exploration of identity, memory and historical trauma
- feminist perspectives
- intersection of race, gender and sexuality
- postmodern narrative techniques
- focus on family, community and generational continuity

Toni Morrison emerged as one of the most influential novelists of the late twentieth century. Her works foregrounded African-American cultural traditions while focusing on trauma and generational memory. Alongside Morrison, writers such as Alice Walker and Maya Angelou brought African American women's experiences to the forefront. These authors integrated feminist concerns with racial identity, creating narratives that were both intimate and politically resonant. Their contributions expanded the thematic range of African-American literature, ensuring that questions of gender and voice became central to its evolution.

Key figures include:

- Toni Morrison (1931–2019)
- Alice Walker (1944–)
- Maya Angelou (1928–2014)
- August Wilson (1945–2005)

STUDY QUESTIONS & TASKS

- Explain the origins of African slavery in North America and the significance of the year 1619.
- Discuss the role of the Underground Railroad in the abolitionist movement.
- What were the main goals and outcomes of the Reconstruction Amendments (13th, 14th, 15th)?
- How did Jim Crow laws institutionalise racial segregation after Reconstruction?
- How did the Harlem Renaissance challenge stereotypes and redefine African-American identity?
- What were the goals of the Black Arts Movement, and how did it influence African-American aesthetics.

- Select one author from the Harlem Renaissance or the Black Arts Movement and analyse how their work engages with themes of race and identity.

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