

A Chronology of American Literature

Information below was paraphrased and synthesized from M.H. Abrams' *A Glossary of Literary Terms*

PERIOD

1. Colonial Period—1607-1775
2. Early National Period—1775-1828
3. The Romantic Period—1828-1865

Transcendentalism-- an outlook that espoused cognizance of imposed structure like time and space, as well as morality and other trends that transcend knowledge. They reacted against rigid rationalism, empirical philosophy, formalized religion, social conformity, materialism, commercialism.

MAJOR AUTHORS

1. William Bradford, John Winthrop, Cotton Mather, Jonathan Edwards, Phillis Wheatley, Benjamin Franklin, Anne Bradstreet
2. Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, William Cullen Bryant, Edgar Allan Poe.

Frederick Douglass—*Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass*
Harriet Jacobs—Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl
3. Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne, William Cullen Bryant, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, John Greenleaf Whittier, Walt Whitman, James Russell Lowell,

CHARACTERISTICS AND TRAITS

1. Most of the literature from this time period is religious, practical, or historical and otherwise non-fictional. Only Wheatley and Bradstreet are poets who do not deal with the above mentioned subjects. The men listed under Major Authors are rooted in the puritanical tradition of religiosity.
2. The first group of writers is the first authors of any merit to successfully sell and publish their work for mass consumption. Irving and Poe focus on the gothic narratives of mystery and terror. Poe is credited with inventing the mystery-detective genre.
3. Emerson and Thoreau are **transcendentalists**. The definition of Romanticism in American Literature is no different than the definition in British lit. This period also initiates a literature that is becoming uniquely American, distinctive from its European counterpart(s). Cooper deals with settlement living; Stowe deals with the slave experience. Hawthorne and Melville deal with American social experience.

PERIOD

4. Realist and Naturalist
Period—1865-1914

MAJOR AUTHORS

4. **Realists**--Mark Twain, William Dean Howells, Henry James, Brett Harte, Sarah Owen Jewett, Mary Wilkins Freeman, George W. Cable, Kate Chopin, Emily Dickinson

Absurdists and Magical realists—Franz Kafka, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Jorge Luis Borges.

CHARACTERISTICS AND TRAITS

ROMANTICISM Cont.

Prose romance has its roots in *chivalric romance* of the Middle Ages and the **Gothic novel** of the later eighteenth century.

The **Gothic novel** uses gloomy settings in which a character is exploited by a lustful or villainous second character to evoke chilling mystery, terror or horror. An example is Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein*. Gothic elements of the macabre and terrifying are explored in the works of Poe and Faulkner and Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*, a reasonably good book and a classic film.

Prose romance feature characters clearly depicted as heroes, victims, masters, or victims. Protagonists tend to be solitary or isolated from social contexts. Sometimes action is set in the past in a manner to suspend the reader's expectations based on everyday experiences. Characters frequently pursue an ideal or an adventure. Non-realistic events are often symbolic of primal desires, hopes, or terrors.

4. Realism is a response against Romanticism. The Realists wanted to depict life as it seems to the reader, not as an ideal. Realists root their work in regional milieus and depict the commonplace often in minute detail. Realists also represent the absurd or magical, but they render the story in a direct reporter-like manner.

PERIOD

5. Naturalist Period

Naturalism as a philosophy is a product of Darwinian biology that holds that humans exist entirely in the order of nature. Humans have no soul and are no more or less special than any other species. Human nature is determined entirely by heredity and environment (nature and nurture). Humans are governed by compulsive instincts: hunger, sexuality, and the drive to dominate—social power or prestige, prestige.

6. Modern Period—1914-1936

The Modernists are disillusioned following WWI and feel alienated by an American culture that over-commercialized and perhaps a bit crass. The Jazz Age and the Great Depression and New Deal reforms inform some of the authors' works.

MAJOR AUTHORS

5. **Naturalists**—Frank Norris, Jack London, Theodore Dreiser, Stephen Crane

6. **Poets**—Edgar Lee Master, Edwin Arlington Robinson, Robert Frost, Carl Sandburg, Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, Robinson Jeffers, Marianne Moore, T.S. Eliot, Edna St. Vincent Millay, e.e. cummings
Novelists—Edith Wharton, Sinclair Lewis, Willa Cather, Gertrude Stein, Sherwood Anderson, John Dos Passos, F. Scott Fitzgerald, William Faulkner,, Ernest Hemingway, Thomas Woolf, John Steinbeck

CHARACTERISTICS AND TRAITS

5. Naturalism is considered an even more accurate depiction of life than Realism. Naturalist writers depict their characters and settings with scientific and reporter-like objectivity. The narrator never imposes himself into the text to pass judgment or sympathize with characters or their situations. Often the style features a frankness about bodily functions. Characters sometimes feature animal-like drives, desires, or strengths. The good are not necessarily rewarded and the bad are not necessarily punished simply for the sake of denouement. If an ending seems tragic, such as a character being killed or eaten, it is not. Rather such an ostensible ending is a character succumbing to a greater natural force, which is no more or less tragic than a big fish eating a little fish.

6. The Modernists challenge the certainties of traditional social organization such as morality, patriotism, and conceptions about the self. Stylistically, some of the writers break with structural conventions. Depictions are realistic, but a sense of disillusion permeates many of their works.

PERIOD

Postmodernism—1945- present

7. Ultimately, this is a vague term. Certainly all literature from the past seventy years cannot be defined within the bounds of the definition of this concept. Aside from the writers who engage ideas as described in Characteristics and Traits in their fiction, many writers over the past forty years follow none of these conventions.
8. Multi-cultural Literature

MAJOR AUTHORS

7. Jorge Luis Borges, Samuel Beckett, Vladimir Nabokov, Thomas Pynchon, Paul Auster, Kurt Vonnegut
8. Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Gloria Naylor, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Gwendolyn Brooks, Maya Angelou, Rita Dove
Dramatists—Lorraine Hansberry, August Wilson

Leslie Marmon Silko
Amy Tan
Oscar Hijuelos
Sandra Cisneros
Julia Alvarez

Great World Authors: Chinua Achebe, Junot Diaz, Derek Walcott, Orhan Pamuk, Jhumpa Lahiri

CHARACTERISTICS AND TRAITS

7. Postmodernism extends sometimes to the extreme the experiments of the Modernists. The Postmodernists also endeavor to subvert the foundations of readers' expectations to reveal meaningless of perceptions readers take for granted. For example the idea of reality is treated as malleable, interpretive, and undefinable by some writers. Some postmodernists blend genres as well as culture and styles, transitioning from the playful to the serious. The general idea is that no idea or form can be defined as absolute. Therefore everything is relative, and boundaries are to be defined as the author deems appropriate to the subject of the material.
8. At the end of the Modern Period in American Literature, several great African American writers emerged who wrote about the African American Experience. This allowed other minorities to follow in their wake, writing about their cultural and social experiences thereby expanding the literary canon from nearly only white men to men and women of all cultural affiliations.

