

American Literature

major literary movements and terms



Native American – The dates for this period are very unclear because we have absolutely no idea when they started. Much of the literature of that period were myths, and, of course, the Native Americans still write today. Most of what our text calls Native American myths were written long before Europeans settled in North America.

Puritan – (1472-1750) – Most of this is histories, journals, personal poems, sermons, and diaries. Most of this literature is either utilitarian (meaning, we are all members of the same moral community), very personal, or religious. We call it *Puritan* because the majority of the writers during this period were strongly influenced by Puritan ideals and values. *Jonathan Edwards continues to be recognized from this period.*

Enlightenment – (1750-1800) – Called the *Enlightenment* period due to the influence of science and logic, this period is marked in US literature by political writings. Genres included political documents, speeches, and letters. *Benjamin Franklin is typical of this period, also called Age of Reason.* There is a lack of emphasis and dependence on the Bible and more use of common sense (logic) and science. There was not a divorce from the Bible but an adding to or expanding of the truths found there.

Romanticism – (1800-1840) - *Romanticism* was a literary and artistic movement of the nineteenth century that placed a premium on fancy, imagination, emotion, nature and individuality. There's a movement here from personal and political documents to entertaining ones. Purely American topics were introduced such as frontier life. *Romantic elements can be found in the works of American writers as diverse as Cooper, Poe, Thoreau, Emerson, Dickinson, Hawthorne, and Melville. Romanticism is particularly evident in the works of the New England Transcendentalists.*

Transcendentalism – (1840-1855) - *Transcendentalism* was an American literary and philosophical movement of the nineteenth century. The Transcendentalists, who were based in New England, believed that intuition and the individual conscience “transcend” experience and thus are better guides to truth than are the senses and logical reason. *Influenced by Romanticism*, the Transcendentalists respected the individual spirit and the natural world, believing that divinity was present everywhere, in nature and in each person. *The Transcendentalists included Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Bronson Alcott, W.H. Channing, Margaret Fuller, and Elizabeth Peabody.*

Realism – (1865-1915) - *Realism* is the presentation in art of the details of actual life. Realism was also a literary movement that began during the nineteenth century and stressed the actual as opposed to the imagined or the fanciful. The Realists tried to write truthfully and objectively about ordinary characters in ordinary situations. They reacted against *Romanticism*, rejecting heroic, adventurous, unusual, or unfamiliar subjects. The Realists, in turn, were followed by the *Naturalists*, who traced the effects of heredity and environment on people helpless to change their situations. *American realism grew from the work of local-color writers such as Bret Harte and Sarah Orne Jewett and is evident in the writings of writers such as Mark Twain, Kate Chopin and Henry James.*

Naturalism – An outgrowth of *Realism*, *Naturalism* was a literary movement among novelists at the end of the nineteenth century and during the early decades of the twentieth century. The Naturalists tended to view people as hapless victims of immutable natural laws. *Early exponents of Naturalism included Stephen Crane, Jack London, and Theodore Dreiser.*

Regionalism – Another outgrowth of *Realism*, *Regionalism* in literature is the tendency among certain authors to write about specific geographical areas. Regional writers like Willa Cather and William Faulkner, present the distinct culture of an area, including its speech, customs, beliefs, and history. Local-color writing may be considered a type of Regionalism, but Regionalists, like the southern writers of the 1920's, usually go beyond mere presentation of cultural idiosyncrasies and attempt, instead, a sophisticated sociological or anthropological treatment of the culture of a region.

Imagism – *Imagism* was a literary movement that flourished between 1912 and 1927. *Led by Ezra Pound and Amy Lowell*, the Imagist poets rejected nineteenth-century poetic forms and language. Instead, they wrote short poems that used ordinary language and free verse to create sharp, exact, concentrated pictures.

Modern Age – (1915-1946) – An age of disillusionment and confusion—just look at what was happening in history in the US during these dates—this period brought us perhaps our best writers. The authors during this period raised all the great questions of life...but offered no answers. *Faulkner, Steinbeck, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and Frost are all examples.*

Harlem Renaissance – Part of the Modern Age, The *Harlem Renaissance*, which occurred during the 1920's, was a time of African American artistic creativity centered in Harlem, in New York City. *Writers of the Harlem Renaissance include Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, Jean Toomer, Langston Hughes, and Arna Bontemps.*

Contemporary – (1946-present) – great stuff, but not a clear philosophy.