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Department of English

Level : Second Year

Module : Literary Texts

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The History of American Literature

1. Colonial Period (1600s–1750s): Voices of Faith and Frontier

American literature begins with the quills of settlers scratching out tales of survival and divine purpose. The Puritans, arriving in New England, dominate early **texts with religious fervor**. John Winthrop's 1630 sermon "A Model of Christian Charity" imagines a godly society—a "city upon a hill"—blending hope with strict moral order. Poetry emerges too: Anne Bradstreet's *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America* (1650) mixes household musings with spiritual devotion, her quiet voice a rare female echo in a patriarchal world.

Adventure shapes other works. Mary Rowlandson's *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God* (1682), a captivity narrative, recounts her abduction by Native Americans—part thriller, part testament to faith. These writings aren't polished; they're practical—sermons to guide, diaries to record, stories to warn. Yet they root American literature in personal experience and the wild, untamed land.

2. Early National Period (1750s–1820s): A Nation's First Words

As the colonies forge a nation, literature **shifts from piety to politics**. The Revolutionary War (1775–1783) sparks fiery prose—**Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* (1776)** ignites rebellion with its bold call to break from Britain, selling half a million copies in a fledgling population. **Benjamin Franklin's witty essays and autobiography (1791)** champion reason and self-reliance, while **the Declaration of Independence (1776), penned by Thomas Jefferson**, marries Enlightenment ideals to a new national spirit.

Fiction stirs too. Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland* (1798) brings gothic chills to American soil—murder and mystery in Pennsylvania, not European castles. Poetry joins the fray: Philip Freneau's "The Rising Glory of America" (1771) heralds a land of promise. This era's literature is a declaration of its own—raw, urgent, distinctly American.

3. 19th Century (1820s–1900): Imagination and Truth

The 19th century is America's literary breakout—**expansion, industry, and slavery** fuel a creative surge. Two movements stand tall: **Romanticism** and **Realism**.

Romanticism (1820s–1860s): Imagination rules. Washington Irving's *The Sketch Book* (1819–1820) spins "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," folklore with a local twist. James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826) paints the frontier in heroic hues.

Transcendentalists like Ralph Waldo Emerson ("Nature," 1836) and Henry David Thoreau (Walden, 1854) urge a return to nature and self, while Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1855) sings of democracy in unbridled verse.

American Renaissance (1840s–1860s): A literary peak—Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) wrestles with guilt, Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851) chases the unknowable. These works deepen Romanticism with moral weight and national soul-searching.

Realism (1860s–1900): After the Civil War (1861–1865), romance fades to reality. Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) captures life's messiness—humor, dialect, and hard truths along the Mississippi. Henry James (*The Portrait of a Lady*, 1881) probes minds, Edith Wharton (*The House of Mirth*, 1905) exposes privilege. Voices of the enslaved—Frederick Douglass's *Narrative* (1845), Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852)—demand justice, grounding literature in lived struggle.

4. Modern Period (1900–1945): Breaking the Mold

The 20th century dawns with upheaval—war, depression, and cities redefine America. Modernism arrives, shattering old forms with new questions.

Lost Generation: World War I scars writers like Ernest Hemingway (*A Farewell to Arms*, 1929)—terse, tough prose—and F. Scott Fitzgerald (*The Great Gatsby*, 1925), chronicling wealth's hollow shine.

Harlem Renaissance: Black artistry blooms—Langston Hughes' poetry ("I, Too," 1926) and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) sing of resilience and roots.

Innovation: T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) fractures verse with global echoes; William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930) bends time and voice in Southern dust. Realism persists—Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906) digs into labor—but Modernism's bold strokes lead.

5. Contemporary Period (1945–Present): A Chorus of Voices

Post-World War II, American literature diversifies—global reach, civil rights, and technology reshape the page. It's a mosaic, not a monolith.

Postwar Titans: J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) voices youth's rebellion; Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* (1953) mirrors societal fear.

Diversity Rises: Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977) reclaims Black history; Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977) heals through Native tales. Immigrant voices—Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989)—join the mix

Postmodern Play: Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) and Don DeLillo's *Underworld* (1997) twist reality with wit and sprawl. New forms—graphic novels, digital poetry—push boundaries into the 21st century.

Recurring Echoes

- **Selfhood:** From Bradstreet's quiet defiance to Morrison's bold reclamation—a quest to define "I."
- **Place:** Cooper's forests, Twain's rivers, DeLillo's cities—the land molds the word.
- **Change:** Paine's revolution, Whitman's democracy, Baldwin's justice—literature tracks a nation's pulse.