

English Department

Module: History of American Literature

Lecture 03: The making of American Literature [American Romanticism] (1800-1865)

1st year Master (SII)

Introduction:

In an age of revolution, literature was greatly influenced by political texts. In many cases these texts are of more interest than the fiction and the didactic verse they provoked. The American Revolution was a consequence of British greed and the American wish for more freedom and less taxation. Although the American colonies were not represented in the British parliament, they were forced to pay increasingly repressive taxes, as determined by the Sugar Act (1764), the Stamp Act (1765), and the Townshend Acts that charged duty on imported glass, paint, lead, paper, and tea. Resistance, first in print, led to the Boston "massacre" in 1770, when five protesters were killed by British troops. In 1773, Americans attacked British merchant ships in what became known as the Boston Tea Party. Thereafter, several states organized joint resistance, and by 1774 the First Continental Congress met in Philadelphia and denounced "taxation without representation." In the War of Independence, which began rather haphazardly in 1775, George Washington was appointed by Congress to lead the Continental Army. He faced a succession of military failures and had difficulty recruiting sufficient numbers of soldiers from a divided population. But as the popular demand for independence grew, so did military success. On July 4, 1776, Congress approved the *Declaration of Independence*, one of the most important political texts of the Enlightenment. Aided by France from 1778 on, the Americans finally defeated Lord Cornwallis's army at Yorktown in 1781. By the Treaty of Paris in 1783 Britain recognized the independence of the United States of America. By 1789 the USA had a constitution. Confidence was great and history to be made by a new country that finally saw the optimism of the founding fathers reconfirmed. As far as American literature from this period is concerned, it is very much rooted in political events. Many writers were politicians themselves, siding with the Royalists and Loyalists or the Independents.

The Making of American Literature:

After their independence, the thirteen colonies formed a new nation that had to work on itself in all fields, including literature, to create her personal and international identity. With the

acquisition of new territories (The Louisiana Purchase 1803) and the population growth (from one million and a half in 1760 to thirty one and a half million by 1860), and being over-run by immigrants from all over the world, the United States was becoming a large and self-confidently expansionist nation.

The real change, that happened in the nation and its impact can be sensed in all social dimensions, is the economic one. The economic structure of the country was changing from agriculture to industry, and its population was moving from the country to the town (the process of urbanization). For example, the development of transportation facilitated trade and travel. This development encouraged farmers to produce cash crops for market. It stimulated the growth of a whole new range of industries, among them lumbering, mining and the production of machine tools.

In 1837, Ralph Waldo Emerson delivered to Harvard's Phi Beta Kappa Society the speech titled "The American Scholar", which Oliver Wendell Holmes called "An Intellectual Declaration of Independence". In it Emerson stated that: "Perhaps the time is already come...when the sluggard intellect of this continent will look from under its iron lids, and fill the postponed expectation of the world with something better than the exertions of mechanical skill....who can doubt, that poetry will revive and lead in a new age". Emerson urged his audience to participate in the creation of American literary tradition.

If the revolutionary period had defined what Americans were not-subjects of England- the overriding challenge during these decisive years was to articulate what in fact America and Americans were. Many besides Emerson urged American writers to play a prominent role chronicling and celebrating the ongoing national drama. Many felt the need for a literature to match the uniqueness of the country and its aspirations. However, if the nation had its independence from Britain, its literature was still mainly subservient to English models and depreciated as second hand and second rate. In 1820, the British critic Sydney Smith declared, with some justifications: " In the four quarters of the globe, who reads an American book? Or goes to an American play? Or looks at an American picture or statue?"

In the first two decades of America's national history, there is little to challenge Smith's view. In poetry, Americans mainly imitated English neoclassical models or the more recent works of the English Romantics, such as William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Lord Byron, as well as Sir Walter Scott.

The first significant challenges to the domination of British authors came from the two New Yorkers, Washington Irving and James Fenimore Cooper. Irving Washington went on to become the first American writer to achieve international renown with *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon* (1819-1820). “*Rip Van Winkle and the Legend of the Sleepy Hollow*” demonstrated the imaginative possibilities of American themes, its past and its setting. Irving's popular success spawned a host of imitators and a market for American writing, while his subsequent histories, travel books, and biographies, along with his sketches and tales, helped establish and legitimize a distinctive American Literary voice and subject matter.

Like Irving, James Fenimore Cooper achieved his initial success by re-creating America's past. The series of five Leatherstocking tales chronicles the career of the prototypical American frontiersman, Natty Bumppo, and his Indian companion, Chingachgook, against the backdrop of mid-eighteenth-century American history. More than any other writer of the period, Cooper tapped into the mythic reservoir of the American landscape and the archetypal American conflicts between the red man and the white, the individual and the community, nature and civilization.

Cooper stands at the beginning of a truly American tradition of the novel that utilized native settings, problems, and characters.

What Francis Otto Matthiessen (1902-50) termed the "American literary renaissance" came after Cooper, toward the middle of the 19th century.

If Irving and Cooper by their success showed that an American writer could compete with the best of Europe by exploring the thematic and poetic possibilities of America, a third figure, Edgar Allan Poe, helped raise the standard for artistry while formulating distinctive new imaginative forms. Essayist, editor, reviewer, poet, and fiction writer, Poe was America's first literary theorist as well as practitioner.

Besides Irving's, Cooper's and Poe 's testing of the American imagination against dominant European modes of expression, the first breakthrough for American literature came from New England. There the particularly American strain of Romanticism known as Transcendentalism emerged.

The transcendentalists rejected a narrow materialistic, rationalistic conception of the world in favor of secular spirituality, emphasizing the primacy of the individual in a direct relationship with the forces of nature. Because it rejected dogma and promoted intellectual and artistic risk taking, Transcendentalism embodied American notions of individualism, self-reliance, and

equality. Whitman observed that it was Emerson who had brought him to a boil, and the creative energies released by Emerson and the Transcendentalists helped produce arguably the greatest creative decade in American literary history.

The artistic achievement began with a New Englander who was influenced by some transcendental principles. Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) which combines elements of the historical and gothic romance with a philosophical exploration of the nature of sin, guilt, and redemption from the Puritan Past.

Set in seventeenth-century Boston, *The Scarlet Letter* is concerned with the heroic suffering and eventual triumph of Hester Prynne over Puritan society. Because Hester committed adultery with Arthur Dimmesdale in the absence of her husband, Roger Chillingworth (the child Pearl is the living proof of this sin), she is forced by the Puritan community to wear the red letter "A" (for adultery) as a token of her guilt. Hawthorne analyses the mental suffering and the moral conflicts of the three major characters. Chillingworth returns to find his wife in the stocks, refusing to name her lover, and he decides to conceal his identity. In his search for Hester's paramour he becomes a morally degraded monomaniac. The preacher Dimmesdale struggles for years with his conscience. He finally makes a public confession and dies in Hester's arms. Hester, the heroine, does penance for her sin by helping other unfortunates in the Puritan community, but she refuses to live according to the rigid Puritan standards. She even returns voluntarily from her exile in Europe, decides to continue wearing the letter "A" and finds her peace of mind by living according to her own conscience.

In the middle of the positive changes that were happening in the American society, involving the development of literary writing, the spirit of greed and exploitation increased. The situation of the Afro-Americans worsened. All hope some of the founding fathers might have had, that slavery would die out or slaves gradually be freed, was extinguished by the invention of the cotton gin, and the vast expansion in the demand for the cotton in Great Britain. So, Slavery was a profitable enterprise and it could not easily be dissolved.

As America expanded westward, the opening up of new territory threatened the delicate balance between free and slave states, exacerbating animosity between North and South and pushing the nation closer to conflict.

Abolitionists in Britain and America helped publish dozens of slave narratives documenting the abuses of slavery, the most popular of which was the narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass

(1845). During the 1850's, the first novel written by an African American, William Wells Brown's *Clotel; or, the President's daughter* (1853), depicting the slave daughter of Thomas Jefferson, was published in London. The first novel by an African American published in the United States is Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* (1859). Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), the biggest-selling American novel in the nineteenth century and the most controversial book published in the United States up to that time, did more than any other literary work to engage the nation in the debate over slavery. Applauded by abolitionists worldwide and reviled by slaveholders, the novel, like the institution it attacked, divided the nation. North and South, free and slave states, seemed on either side of an unbridgeable and widening chasm.

Like the nation itself, American literature between 1790 and 1860 came of age, discovering distinctive voices and subjects, drawing on both what united and divided Americans.

References:

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