

American Literature in Historical Context

By Melissa Williamson

Introduction

In order to fully grasp an understanding of American literature and how it has progressed over the centuries, it is important to study the cultural and historical events of the time. The American literature of today is extremely different from that written at the beginning of the nation.

It is useful to note that many times literary works reflected social changes *before* they occurred in society at large. For good or evil it is clear throughout the history of America that literature had a great impact on society.

Ask yourself these questions as you read the literature for this course:

1. What national events may have impacted the author's work?
2. Was the author trying to impact society with their work?
3. How were women represented?
4. How were minorities represented?
5. Were there any cultural shifts which impacted the literature?
6. What can be learned about the culture from the work?

I hope you enjoy this study through American literature and thoughtfully consider the social changes, both positive and negative, which may have been affected by the popular literature of various periods of American history.

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Course Outline

Course Objective: Students should be able to use literary criticism techniques to analyze a variety of literary genres by looking at both the text as well as the social, cultural, and political climate of each period of American history.

Weeks	Years	Historical Period	Main Book	Other Authors
1-4	?-1700	Pre-colonization through Early Colonization	<i>Myths and Legends of the Sioux</i> by Marie L. McLaughlin and <i>Viking Tales</i> by Jennie Hall	Mayflower Compact William Bradford Edward Winslow William Penn
5-8	1700-1775	Early Colonization	Poems on Various Subjects by Phillis Wheatley	Benjamin Franklin Thomas Jefferson Jonathan Edwards George Whitefield
9-12	1776-1820	American Revolution and Post-Revolution	<i>The Sketch-book of Geoffrey Crayon</i> by Washington Irving	Hannah Foster Federalist Essays Charles Brockden Brown
13-16	1820-1860	Pre-Civil War	<i>The Scarlet Letter</i> by Nathaniel Hawthorne and Short Stories by Edgar Allen Poe	James Fenimore Cooper Frederick Douglass Ralph Waldo Emerson Henry David Thoreau Harriet Beecher Stowe Herman Melville
17-20	1861-1877	Civil War and Reconstruction	<i>Little Women</i> (1868) by Louisa May Alcott	Harriet Ann Jacobs Abraham Lincoln Mary Chestnut Emily Dickinson Henry Wadsworth Longfellow Mark Twain

21-24	1878-1901	Victorian	<i>A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court</i>	Susan B. Anthony Booker T. Washington Walt Whitman Kate Chopin Stephen Crane Kate Douglas Wiggin Nora A. Smith
25-28	1902-1940	WWI, Roaring Twenties, Great Depression	Thornton Burgess	Frank L. Baum Grace Livingston Hill Edith Wharton O. Henry Paul Lawrence Dunbar
29-32	1941-1969	WWII, Korean War, Civil Rights	<i>Nancy Dale: Army Nurse</i> by Ruby Lorraine Radford	Langston Hughes Ray Bradbury Agatha Christie E. E. Smith Edgar Rice Burroughs
33-36	1970-Present	Post-modernism	Two novels of your choice	Maya Angelou Shel Silverstein

SAMPLE

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Unit 1: Pre-colonization through 1700

Week 1:

Viking Tales by Jennie Hall – Part 1 & 2

Day	Reading	To Do	✓
Monday	The Baby – Harald is King	Read “Language of Literature”	
Tuesday	Harald’s Battle – King Harald Goes West-Over-Seas	Choose one story and complete a Literature-at-a-Glance page for it.	
Wednesday	Home in Iceland – Eric the Red	Choose one story and complete a Literature-at-a-Glance page for it.	
Thursday	Leif and His New Land – Wineland the Good	Journal Prompt: What are some of the character qualities the Norsemen valued? How do you see these values reflected in the tales?	
Friday	Finish reading assignments.	Finish Literature at a Glance for each story.	

Devotional Option for Friday:

Read: Psalm 86

Consider: Since the earliest times, civilizations that do not follow the God of the Bible have created other gods. What was the purpose of these created deities? Why do you think we find them in every culture? Do you still see this type of thing in today’s culture? What does verse 8 say about these other gods?

Week 2:

Myths and Legends of the Sioux by Marie L. McLaughlin

Day	Reading	To Do	✓
Monday	The Forgotten Ear of Corn – The Rabbit and The Bear with the Body	Listen to “Early Colonization through 1700” Complete History at a Glance.	
Tuesday	Story of the Lost Wife – The Signs of Corn	Choose one story and complete a Literature-at-a-Glance page for it.	
Wednesday	Story of the Rabbits – The Wonderful Turtle	Choose one story and complete a Literature-at-a-Glance page for it.	
Thursday	The Man and the Oak – The Unktomi (Spider), Two Widows, and The Red Plums	Journal Prompt: What are some of the character qualities the Sioux valued? How do you see these values reflected in the tales?	
Friday	Finish reading assignments.		

Devotional Option for Friday:

Read: Matthew 13

Consider: Jesus also taught lessons in the form of stories. Why is storytelling an effective teaching tool? How do Jesus' parables differ from the Native Americans myths and legends?

Week 3:

The Mayflower and Her Log

Day	Reading	To Do	✓
Monday	Chapters 1-2	Read through "Completing the Author-at-a-Glance page."	
Tuesday	Chapters 3-4	Complete Author-at-a-Glance page for William Bradford and Edward Winslow.	
Wednesday	Chapters 5-6		
Thursday	Chapters 7-8	Journal Prompt: What was the benefit of keeping a record of the trip to New England? How do we do this now in modern times?	
Friday	Finish reading assignments.	Finish Literature at a Glance.	

Devotional Option for Friday:

Read: Matthew 8

Consider: Traveling by ship can result in many perils. How did the disciples react to the storm in verses 18-27? What had they witnessed just before this incident in verses 1-17? Why was the timing of the storm important to their training in faith and understanding of who Jesus was?

Week 4:

Selected Readings

Day	Reading	To Do	✓
Monday	Selected Poems by Anne Bradstreet	Read "Language of Poetry." Complete the rhyme scheme for the first two poems.	
Tuesday	Day of Doom by Michael Wigglesworth	Author at a Glance for: Anne Bradstreet Michael Wigglesworth Mary Rowlandson William Penn	
Wednesday	Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson by Rowlandson	Complete literature at a Glance for this work.	

Thursday	Excerpts from William Penn	Journal Prompt: What was the general tone of the works you have read so far this week? Why do you think literature at this time presented such a tone?	
Friday	Finish reading assignments	Finish Literature at a Glance	

Devotional Option for Friday:

Read: Ecclesiastes 3

Consider: Much of the writings of early America have a foreboding, serious tone, similar to Ecclesiastes 3. How should we approach life when difficulties come? How can we keep joy even during trials?

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Literature at a Glance

Title

Author

Genre

(check all that apply)

- | | | | | | | | | |
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| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Fiction | Coming of Age | Fantasy | Historical | Legend/Folklore | Realistic | Science Fiction | Mystery | Humor/Satire |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Fable | Non-Fiction | Essay | Narrative (Non-Fiction) | Speech | Biography | Auto-Biography | Drama | Poetry |

Content

Setting: Where

Setting: When

Protagonist

Antagonist

Other important characters

Plot

Main Conflict

Resolution

Themes
