# American Literature

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# Imprint

**From the Library of Maggie Enow**

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Prepared for Maggie Enow's school of English Modern Letters.

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## How to Use This Book

American literature is a large house with many rooms, built over several centuries by people who did not always agree about what the house was for. This book gives you a guided walk through its most studied rooms: the essay that declared intellectual independence, the romances that explored guilt and obsession, the poets who invented new American music in opposite ways, the humorist who made a river carry a nation's conscience, and the modern writers who inherited all of it.

Each chapter opens with learning aims, teaches in plain language, and then slows down for a worked example — an analysis written out step by step so you can see how a reading is built. Short excerpts from public-domain works appear throughout, always attributed. They are chosen so that you can practise close reading on real words without this book ever becoming an anthology. Finish each chapter with the exercises, then compare your thinking with the answer guidance.

One habit will help you more than any other in this field: keep asking what the word America is doing in a text. Sometimes it names a place. Sometimes it names a promise — of freedom, of a fresh start, of equality — against which the text measures a failure. Sometimes it names a temptation: wealth, conquest, or innocence kept too long. American writers are often arguing with their own country's idea of itself. If you listen for that argument, the literature opens.

A note for readers coming from African literature in English, the companion volume in this library: you will find familiar questions here in a different key — a colonial language made new, oral voices entering print, a young literature anxious to prove itself, and writers from the margins claiming the centre. Comparing the two fields, carefully and without forcing them to match, is excellent training for a graduate of English Modern Letters.

# Chapter One: What Is American Literature?

## Learning Aims

By the end of this chapter you should be able to:

- define American literature and name its main periods in order;
- explain why early American writers worried about cultural independence;
- distinguish the promise of America as an idea from America as a place in literary analysis;
- use the terms Puritan, Romanticism, Realism, and Modernism accurately in outline.

## 1.1 A Literature in a Country That Argued Itself Into Being

The United States began, unusually, with documents: declarations, constitutions, pamphlets, and sermons arguing about what the new community should be. Literature in America has never quite lost that argumentative birthmark. Even its poems and novels tend to ask public questions. What is a person worth? Who belongs? What does freedom require, and what does it cost others?

American literature, for our purposes, is the imaginative and reflective writing produced in what became the United States, from Indigenous oral traditions and colonial-era texts through to the present, in English and in the many other languages of the continent. In this short book we follow the English-language line that most courses in English Modern Letters examine, while remembering that it is one line among several — Indigenous, Spanish-language, African American, and immigrant traditions run beside and through it, and Chapter Six returns to that fact.

## 1.2 Why Independence on Paper Came Before Independence in Books

Political independence arrived in the late eighteenth century. Literary independence was slower and more anxious. For decades, American books were measured against British models, American authors sought British publishers and British praise, and critics at home asked when — if ever — an American Shakespeare or Milton would appear. This anxiety produced two opposite responses, both fruitful. Some writers imitated European forms as perfectly as they could, to prove the new nation civilised. Others insisted that American subjects — the wilderness, the frontier town, democracy, the common citizen — demanded new forms, new diction, and a deliberate break with deference.

By the middle of the nineteenth century the break had happened, in a flowering often called the American Renaissance: within a few busy years, readers were offered the essays of Emerson, the romances of Hawthorne and Melville, the poetry of Whitman, and

the private, blazing poems of Dickinson, most of hers unpublished until after her death. Chapter by chapter, this book walks through that flowering and what followed it.

## 1.3 A Map of the Periods

Keep this outline in your notebook. Dates are guides, not walls; writers overlap and argue across them.

- **Indigenous and colonial writing:** oral traditions far older than the United States; then sermons, journals, captivity narratives, and revolutionary pamphlets, shaped by Puritan faith and by the project of settlement — and, too often, by the dispossession of the peoples already there.
- **The early national and Romantic period:** essays, tales, and poems asserting a distinct American mind; nature treated as a spiritual teacher; the individual conscience set against institutions.
- **The American Renaissance:** the concentrated brilliance of the mid-nineteenth century — romance, essay, and free verse of lasting power.
- **Realism and Naturalism:** after the Civil War, fiction turns to ordinary life, regional speech, money, cities, and the forces — heredity, environment, chance — that limit free will.
- **Modernism:** in the early twentieth century, experiment with form, voice, and time, under the shock of world war and rapid change.
- **Contemporary literature:** from the mid-twentieth century to now, an widening company of voices — African American, Native American, Latino, Asian American, and women writers in every tradition — remaking the canon and the questions it asks.

## 1.4 The American Idea as a Literary Instrument

Many set texts turn on a gap between promise and practice. A nation founded on a declaration of equality held people in slavery; a land praised for opportunity produced sweatshops; a rhetoric of innocence accompanied conquest. Writers exploit that gap in different ways: the satirist laughs at it, the tragedian mourns it, the reformer documents it, and the poet sometimes tries to sing the promise so fully that the country might grow into it. In your essays, name the promise a text invokes and the practice it sets against it. That single move organises more good analysis than any summary can.

## Worked Example: Testing a Definition

**Question:** A celebrated novel is written in English by an author born in Nigeria, long resident in the United States, and is set in both countries, about students and hair salons and the strangeness of race in America. Is it American literature?

**A model approach:** State your definition first. If American literature means writing that enters substantially into American life and letters — published, read, taught, and argued with there — then this novel qualifies as American literature and also as African literature in English; the categories are not boxes that exclude each other, but conversations a book joins. Note what each label lets you study. As American literature, you read it beside the immigrant novel and the literature of race. As African literature, you read it beside the diaspora writing of Chapter Six of the companion volume. Conclude that a mature criticism lets a book hold more than one citizenship, and says plainly which conversation it is following and why. Definition, application, complication, conclusion — the same discipline you practised in the companion book serves you here.

## Exercises

1. Write a one-sentence definition of American literature and name one kind of writing it must not forget.
2. Give two opposite responses American writers made to cultural anxiety about British models.
3. List the six periods in section 1.3 in order, with one keyword for each.
4. Explain, with an invented example of your own, what is meant by the gap between promise and practice.

## Answer Guidance

5. A sound definition names the place or community, the forms, and the span of time. It must not forget, for example, Indigenous oral traditions, or African American writing, or writing in languages other than English — any one, explained, earns credit.
6. Imitation of European forms to prove civilisation, and deliberate innovation — American subjects, diction, and forms — to declare independence. The two responses often appear in the same generation and sometimes in the same author.
7. Indigenous and colonial (settlement and sermon); early national and Romantic (nature and conscience); American Renaissance (flowering); Realism and Naturalism (ordinary life and limiting forces); Modernism (experiment); Contemporary (widening voices). Keywords may vary if the order and sense are right.
8. Look for a clear promise — equality, opportunity, innocence, freedom — set against a concrete contrary practice, and an explanation of the tension between them. Invented examples are welcome; vagueness is not.

# Chapter Two: A New Nation Finds a Voice — Emerson and Self-Reliance

## Learning Aims

By the end of this chapter you should be able to:

- explain who Ralph Waldo Emerson was and why the essay mattered to him;
- analyse a short public-domain excerpt from Emerson for argument and image;
- define Transcendentalism in plain words;
- discuss both the power and the possible blindness of the doctrine of self-reliance.

## 2.1 The Essay as a Declaration

Ralph Waldo Emerson began as a minister, left the pulpit, and became the young nation's most influential lecturer and essayist. In an address in the eighteen-thirties he called for an American scholar who would think for himself rather than repeat Europe, and his essays became the programme of a movement called Transcendentalism: the belief that truth is known not only through books, churches, and the senses, but through intuition — the soul's direct apprehension of spiritual fact, often awakened by nature.

The essay suited this doctrine. An essay is a mind thinking in public: it can begin with a provocation, test it against an image from a walk or a farm, qualify it, and end with an aphorism you can carry away. When you read Emerson, read for the aphorisms — but also for the movement between them, where the real thinking happens.

## 2.2 Reading Emerson: A Public-Domain Excerpt

> *"Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string."*
>
> *— Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance" (public-domain essay, nineteenth century)*

Consider how much work this short sentence does. The opening command is blunt, almost rude: trust — not your teacher, your party, or your church first, but yourself. Then the image arrives to soften and strengthen it. A heart vibrating to an iron string suggests a musical instrument under tension: the self, properly tuned and struck by experience, gives a true note. Iron matters. This is not soft self-indulgence; the string is iron, under discipline, and it vibrates — it responds — rather than simply asserting. Emerson's self is at its best when it is responsive to a truth larger than whim, which he elsewhere calls the soul or the Over-Soul.

Emerson presses the social consequence without flinching in the same essay, in words that have become a proverb in English:

> *"Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist."*

*— Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance" (public-domain essay, nineteenth century)*

Nonconformity here is not mere contrariness or fashion. It is the refusal to let received opinion do your seeing for you. Emerson knew the cost: the nonconformist will be misunderstood, and he treats being misunderstood as a tax that every reformer and original thinker in history has paid.

### 2.3 Nature as Teacher

In Emerson's writing, nature is not scenery. It is a system of spiritual correspondences: every natural fact — the river's flow, the plant's turning to light — pictures a moral fact. The student who learns to read a landscape is practising to read a soul. This is why so much American writing after Emerson treats a walk, a whale, a river, or a garden as a place where thinking happens. When you meet nature in an American set text, ask what moral or spiritual fact the writer is reading in it, before you call it description.

### 2.4 The Limits of Self-Reliance

A good student praises Emerson's courage and then asks the harder question: whose self could afford to rely on itself in his America? The enslaved person, the factory girl, the dispossessed Native nation — for them, trust thyself could sound like a liberty their society was built to deny. Later American writers take up exactly this objection, some by extending Emerson's promise to those he overlooked, some by showing selves crushed by forces no will can master. Hold both truths: the doctrine liberated minds, and its first formulation did not see everyone. That double judgement is not indecision. It is literary history done properly.

### Worked Example: From Aphorism to Essay Paragraph

**Task:** Build one analytical paragraph from the first excerpt in section 2.2.

**A model paragraph:** Emerson's command to trust the self gains its force from the image that follows it. The heart vibrating to an iron string figures the self as an instrument: passive enough to be struck by truth, disciplined enough — iron, not silk — to sound truly. Self-reliance, the image argues, is not the invention of private opinion but responsiveness to a universal note, and this is why Emerson can demand nonconformity without preaching mere eccentricity. The paragraph you have just read does four things: it quotes briefly, it reads the image closely, it draws the conceptual point, and it connects that point to the chapter's larger theme. Imitate the sequence, whatever text you are given.

### Exercises

9. Define Transcendentalism in two sentences, in your own words.

10. In the iron string image, why does the choice of iron matter?
11. What social cost does Emerson say the nonconformist must expect, and how does he teach readers to regard it?
12. State the strongest objection to self-reliance raised in this chapter, fairly, in three sentences.

## Answer Guidance

13. Credit answers that include: truth is apprehended by intuition and the soul, not only by sense, scripture, or authority; and nature is the great awakener and symbol of that truth. Two clear sentences are enough.
14. Iron signals tension, discipline, and durability. The self that sounds truly is not loose or indulgent; it is strung tight by principle and experience. Answers that contrast iron with a soft material show close reading.
15. The cost is being misunderstood — by institutions, by the crowd, sometimes by friends. Emerson teaches readers to treat misunderstanding as the historical tax on originality, paid by every significant thinker, rather than as proof of error.
16. A fair statement: the doctrine presumes a self free to act on its convictions, yet many people in Emerson's America — the enslaved, the very poor, the dispossessed — were denied that freedom by law and force, so the essay's promise did not at first extend to them. Credit fairness: the objection should be stated as its makers would wish.

# Chapter Three: Shadows and Symbols — Hawthorne and Melville

## Learning Aims

By the end of this chapter you should be able to:

- explain why Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville are called writers of romance rather than realism;
- analyse a symbol without reducing it to a single fixed meaning;
- describe, in your own words, the central obsessions of their best-known books;
- use a short public-domain excerpt to practise close reading of image and tone.

## 3.1 The Romance: Truth of the Heart

Hawthorne called his long fictions romances, and the word is a key. A novel, in his usage, aims at fidelity to ordinary life. A romance claims a latitude — a neutral territory between the real and the imagined — where the writer may arrange light and shadow to reveal what he called the truth of the human heart. Guilt that festers in secret, a sin repeated across generations, a conscience that builds its own prison: these are Hawthorne's subjects, inherited from his Puritan ancestors, some of whom had judged in the witch trials he was ashamed of.

His best-known novel, summarised here in our own words, is set in Puritan Boston and follows a woman condemned to wear a scarlet letter for adultery, the minister who shares her sin and hides it, and the wronged husband who becomes a fiend by nursing revenge. The letter itself is the book's great lesson in symbolism: decreed as a badge of shame, it changes meaning as its wearer lives under it — the community that imposed it slowly reads other words into it, until a symbol meant to fix a person forever instead records how she, and they, have changed. When you write about a symbol, always write about its movement. A symbol that means one thing only is a label. A symbol that gathers meaning is literature.

## 3.2 Hawthorne's Sentence and Conscience

Hawthorne's style — formal, shadowed, fond of twilight and moonlight and the border between waking and dream — is not ornament on his thought. It is his thought. His characters live in a half-light between public judgement and private truth, and the prose makes the reader live there too. In essays, describe the effect of a passage's atmosphere on its meaning, and you will be writing about Hawthorne as he deserves.

## 3.3 Melville and the Whale

Herman Melville, who admired Hawthorne deeply and dedicated his great book to him, took the romance to sea. His whaling novel, summarised here in our own words, is

narrated by a restless young man who signs aboard a whaling ship and finds himself under a captain maimed by a white whale and possessed by a single idea: vengeance on the creature, which he reads as the embodiment of all malice in the universe. Around that hunt Melville builds an encyclopedia — of whales, ships, labour, and law — and a meditation on whether the universe has a meaning at all, and what it does to a mind that demands one.

The white whale is the most argued-over symbol in American literature precisely because it refuses to settle. To the captain it is evil incarnate. To the narrator it is, by turns, wonder, terror, beauty, and a blank wall that returns his questions unanswered. Learn from this: the strongest symbols in fiction are often those a book deliberately declines to solve, so that each character — and each reader — reveals themselves by what they see in it.

## 3.4 Reading Melville: A Public-Domain Excerpt

The novel opens with the most famous introduction in American fiction:

> *"Call me Ishmael."*
>
> *— Herman Melville, Moby-Dick (public-domain novel, nineteenth century)*

Three words, and a seminar's worth of questions. Why call me — an invitation, almost a pseudonym — rather than my name is? The name chosen is biblical: Ishmael, the outcast son, the wanderer whose hand is against everyone. The narrator announces himself, before any whale appears, as an outsider who survives to tell. And the brevity itself is a promise of voice: this enormous, digressive, philosophical book will be spoken by a person, companionably, as if across a table. In your own close reading, never skip a famous opening because it is famous. Fame is where writers hide their most efficient work.

## Worked Example: Writing About a Changing Symbol

**Task:** "A symbol means what its maker says it means. Discuss," with reference to the scarlet letter as presented in this chapter.

**A model approach:** Grant the starting point: the letter begins with an official meaning, imposed by authority — shame, fixed and public. Then trace the change the chapter described: as years pass and the wearer's life answers the sentence with work, charity, and endurance, the community's reading softens; the same cloth comes to be associated with ability and even reverence, and onlookers begin to invent gentler expansions of the letter. The maker's meaning has been revised by time, conduct, and collective memory — which is the novel's quiet argument about all judgement. Conclude that Hawthorne uses the symbol to show meaning as something communities make and remake, not

something authority can seal. Notice again the method: grant, trace change with evidence, conclude with the larger claim the evidence earns.

## Exercises

17. In Hawthorne's usage, how does a romance differ from a novel?
18. Why is the white whale a stronger symbol because it refuses a single meaning? Answer in a paragraph.
19. What three questions does the opening of Melville's novel raise, as analysed in this chapter?
20. A classmate writes: "The letter symbolises shame." Improve the sentence into an analytical claim.

## Answer Guidance

21. A novel, for Hawthorne, keeps faithfully to ordinary life and probability. A romance claims a managed latitude — a neutral territory between fact and imagination — arranged to reveal the truth of the human heart. Credit the contrast and the purpose.
22. Strong answers argue that the whale functions as a test: each character's reading of it exposes that character — vengeance in the captain, wonder and scepticism in the narrator — and the reader is drawn into the same test. A fixed meaning would close the book's central question, whether the universe answers our demand for meaning.
23. Why the narrator offers a name to be called by rather than stating his own; why he chooses the name of a biblical outcast and wanderer; and how the brevity establishes an intimate, companionable voice for a vast book. All three appear in section 3.4.
24. An improved claim names movement: for example, that the letter, imposed to fix its wearer in shame, gradually gathers contrary meanings as her life and her community change, so that the symbol records the failure of official judgement to settle a person's meaning. Any version that adds change over time and a consequence earns credit.

# Chapter Four: Two Poets, Two Americas — Whitman and Dickinson

## Learning Aims

By the end of this chapter you should be able to:

- describe Walt Whitman's free verse and his idea of the poetic self;
- describe Emily Dickinson's compressed lyric form and her themes;
- analyse two short public-domain excerpts, one from each poet;
- explain how two contemporaries can invent opposite forms for the same young nation's poetry.

## 4.1 Whitman: The Self Large Enough to Contain a Country

Walt Whitman, a printer and journalist from New York, published his life's work, a book of poems he kept expanding for the rest of his life, in the middle of the nineteenth century — and paid for the first edition himself, setting some of the type with his own hands. The poems broke the rules his readers knew: no regular rhyme, no fixed metre, lines as long as a breath and then longer, catalogues that sweep from a president to a prostitute to a blade of grass, and a speaker who announces that he is not a poet above the crowd but the crowd itself, singing America by singing himself.

His method is the catalogue and the embrace. List after list of workers, regions, bodies, and trades performs a democratic argument: if everything belongs in the poem, then everyone belongs in the nation. And his self is deliberately contradictory and capacious, as he says in a famous public-domain passage:

> *"I am large, I contain multitudes."*
>
> *— Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself," in Leaves of Grass (public-domain poems, nineteenth century)*

Read that line as a poetics, not a boast. The Whitman speaker contains multitudes because he refuses to evict any part of experience — high and low, body and soul, city and prairie, living and dead. The line also licenses the reader: your multitudes, too, are material for poetry. Few sentences have given more beginners permission to write.

## 4.2 Dickinson: The Room, the Slant, the Lightning

Emily Dickinson, Whitman's exact contemporary, lived most of her life in one house in a Massachusetts town, published almost nothing, and left behind, in drawers and sewn packets, a body of poems that remade American poetry from the opposite direction. Where Whitman expands, Dickinson compresses. Her poems are short, built often on the metres of hymns — the music she heard every Sunday — but bent by dashes, startling

capital letters, and rhymes that slant rather than chime, as if the familiar tune were being thought in, privately and at an angle.

Her subjects are the largest ones, approached at close range: death, faith and its doubts, nature's brief intensities, the mind's weather, and the soul's society with itself. She writes about truth with a famous instruction in method:

> *"Tell all the truth but tell it slant —"*
>
> *— Emily Dickinson, from a poem beginning with that line (public-domain poems, nineteenth century)*

The poem that follows that line argues, in our summary, that truth is a light too bright for our infirm delight to bear head-on, and must arrive gradually, as lightning is explained kindly to children. Slantness, for Dickinson, is not evasion. It is mercy and accuracy at once: some things can only be seen from an angle, and a direct stare falsifies them. Keep this poet in mind whenever a text approaches its subject indirectly — through symbol, through understatement, through a joke at the edge of grief.

### 4.3 Opposite Forms, One Question

Set the two poets side by side and the American question of Chapter One returns in formal dress. How large is a self, and how should a poem hold it? Whitman answers: as large as the continent, in lines that refuse to end. Dickinson answers: as deep as a single room, in lines that stop just where the thought turns. Neither answer cancels the other. Together they map the range your own reading must cover — the literature of the crowd and the literature of the interior, both written in a country that was inventing itself in public and in private at the same time.

Practical advice for examinations: with Whitman, analyse accumulation — what a catalogue includes, in what order, and what its inclusiveness argues. With Dickinson, analyse compression — what a dash suspends, what a capital letter lifts into significance, what the final line leaves unsaid.

### Worked Example: Comparing Two Lines

**Task:** Compare the Whitman and Dickinson excerpts in this chapter as statements about how poetry should work.

**A model approach:** Begin with the apparent contradiction. Whitman's speaker declares largeness and multitude; Dickinson's speaker prescribes indirection and slant. Then look for the shared ground. Both are instructions about reception: Whitman's line tells the reader that a poem may hold everything without resolving it; Dickinson's tells the reader that a poem must approach truth at the angle a mind can bear. Both, that is, trust the

reader with difficulty — Whitman with the difficulty of abundance, Dickinson with the difficulty of reserve. Conclude that the two lines, read together, describe the double discipline of American poetry after them: contain more, say it at a slant. A comparison that finds first contrast, then kinship, then a joint conclusion will outscore one that merely describes each poet in turn.

## Exercises

25. Name three formal features of Whitman's verse and the democratic argument they perform.
26. What does Dickinson's word slant claim about truth and the mind?
27. Why is Whitman's "I contain multitudes" described in this chapter as a poetics rather than a boast?
28. Give one practical analysis strategy for each poet, as advised in section 4.3.

## Answer Guidance

29. Long, unrhymed free-verse lines; catalogues or lists spanning kinds of people and work; a speaker who identifies with the crowd rather than standing above it. The argument: inclusiveness of form performs inclusiveness of nation — everything and everyone belongs.
30. That truth is too intense to be received directly and must arrive gradually or at an angle, like lightning explained to children; indirection is therefore mercy and accuracy, not evasion.
31. Because it describes a method — a speaker who refuses to exclude any part of experience, and who licenses readers to treat their own contradictory experience as poetic material — rather than merely praising the poet's personality.
32. For Whitman, analyse accumulation: the contents and order of a catalogue and what its inclusiveness argues. For Dickinson, analyse compression: the work of dashes, capitals, slant rhyme, and what the poem leaves unsaid.

# Chapter Five: Realism and the River — Mark Twain and After

## Learning Aims

By the end of this chapter you should be able to:

- explain why American fiction turned toward Realism after the Civil War;
- describe Mark Twain's use of vernacular voice and the river novel discussed in this chapter;
- analyse a short public-domain excerpt from Twain for humour and moral seriousness;
- distinguish Realism from Naturalism in one clear sentence each.

## 5.1 After the War, the Ordinary

The Civil War killed certainties along with a generation. The fiction that followed — Realism — distrusted romance's moonlight and preferred the parlour, the office, the small town, and the city street, observed exactly and judged quietly. Realist writers asked how people actually talk, earn, marry, cheat, and hope, and they built a new prestige for the ordinary. Regional writing flourished inside this movement: authors rendered the speech and customs of New England villages, the South, the mining West, so faithfully that dialect itself became evidence.

Naturalism, Realism's sterner sibling, added a philosophy: human beings are conditioned by heredity, environment, and chance, and the novel should study them as a scientist studies specimens. Where the Realist still hopes for moral choice, the Naturalist watches choice narrow to a corridor. Keep the distinction clean in your notes; examiners love it precisely because students blur it.

## 5.2 Twain: A Boy's Voice Carrying a Nation's Conscience

Mark Twain — the pen name of Samuel Clemens, who grew up on the Mississippi River and worked its steamboats — became America's most famous living author by doing what Emerson had demanded: trusting American speech. His masterpiece, summarised here in our own words, is narrated entirely by a barely literate boy fleeing a drunken father, who joins an escaped enslaved man on a raft down the Mississippi. The journey is a string of comic episodes — frauds, feuds, a wreck, a circus — and underneath the comedy runs the book's great moral engine: the boy has been taught by his whole society that helping an enslaved man escape is theft and sin, yet his lived experience on the raft teaches him the man's humanity. At the climax he decides, believing he is choosing damnation, to do the right thing anyway. Few scenes in literature state more clearly the difference between the conscience a society installs and the conscience a person grows.

The vernacular is the achievement and the argument. By letting the boy's uncorrected grammar narrate a great novel, Twain claims that American truth does not need British polish — the claim of Chapter Two, fulfilled in fiction. Students should also learn the standing criticisms of the book: its ending, in which a prolonged cruel game delays the escaped man's freedom, has been charged with betraying the novel's moral seriousness, and its period racial language is a real subject for classroom discussion, not a detail to wave away. A mature essay can hold the book's greatness and its faults in one judgement.

## 5.3 Reading Twain: A Public-Domain Excerpt

Early in the novel the narrator explains his book's terms with a wink that has taught generations of readers how to listen:

> *"You don't know about me without you have read a book by the name of The Adventures of Tom Sawyer; but that ain't no matter."*
>
> *— Mark Twain, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (public-domain novel, nineteenth century)*

Analyse the voice. The double negatives and ain't are not errors to forgive; they are credentials. This narrator will not be translating his world into schoolroom English, so the reader must come to him. Notice, too, the sly literary joke: the boy measures his own reality against a previous book and dismisses its authority — that ain't no matter — which is Twain's realism announcing itself against romance in the book's first breath. When you quote vernacular in an essay, never apologise for it. Analyse what it certifies: authenticity, class, region, and a refusal of official language.

## 5.4 What Realism Left Behind

Realism taught American fiction its habits of exact observation, regional truth, and suspicion of fine phrases — habits no later movement has discarded, even when rebelling. It also widened the cast: clerks, farmers' daughters, immigrants, salesmen, and the poor enter the centre of serious fiction and stay there. When Chapter Six turns to modern writing, watch for Realism's inheritance inside the experiments: the new forms were built to hold the ordinary world more truly, not to escape it.

## Worked Example: Humour That Carries a Moral Argument

**Task:** "Twain's novel is essentially a comic book for boys. Discuss."

**A model approach:** Concede the comedy honestly — the episodes are funny, the boy's literal-minded reports of adult absurdity are funnier, and generations of boys have loved the raft. Then follow the raft's passenger. The escaped man's presence converts each

episode: a feud's corpses, a mob's cowardice, a fraud's cruelty all educate the narrator's conscience, until the boy can prefer imagined damnation to betraying his friend. The comedy is the delivery system for that education; laughter keeps the reader aboard while the moral cargo is loaded. Conclude by refining the prompt: it is a comic book whose comedy is the method of a serious argument about conscience and a slaveholding society — and note, for balance, the standing criticism of the ending from section 5.2. Grant, trace, refine, and qualify: the same four moves, now familiar, carry this essay.

## Exercises

33. State the difference between Realism and Naturalism in one sentence each.
34. Why is Twain's choice of a barely literate boy as narrator an argument, not just a device?
35. In the excerpt in section 5.3, what do the double negatives certify, and what literary joke does the sentence make?
36. Name the two standing criticisms of Twain's river novel mentioned in this chapter.

## Answer Guidance

37. Realism observes ordinary life exactly and leaves room for moral choice within it. Naturalism studies people as conditioned by heredity, environment, and chance, with choice narrowed accordingly. One sentence each, with the contrast visible, is the goal.
38. Because the vernacular narration claims that American truth needs no imported polish, fulfilling in fiction the demand for cultural independence; it also places society's official morality in a voice that exposes it, since the boy reports his world's lessons in words that reveal their absurdity.
39. They certify authenticity — region, class, and a refusal to translate the world into schoolroom English — so the reader must come to the narrator. The joke is the dismissal of the earlier book's authority over his reality, announcing realism's break with romance in the opening lines.
40. That the ending's prolonged game delays the escaped man's freedom and betrays the book's moral seriousness; and that its period racial language is a genuine problem requiring discussion. Both should be stated plainly.

# Chapter Six: Modern America and the Voices That Followed

## Learning Aims

By the end of this chapter you should be able to:

- describe what changed in American writing with Modernism;
- summarise, in your own words, the contributions of major twentieth-century movements and communities of writers;
- explain how the canon widened and why that widening is itself a literary event;
- plan an essay that connects a modern work to the earlier chapters of this book.

**A note on quotation in this chapter:** Most twentieth-century works discussed here remain in copyright and are taught by summary and analysis in our own words, without reproduced passages.

## 6.1 Modernism: New Forms for a Broken Speed

In the early twentieth century, American writers faced a world remade by industry, cities, immigration, world war, and the automobile — and many concluded that the smooth, well-made forms of the previous century could no longer tell the truth about it. Modernist writing experiments: it breaks chronology, multiplies viewpoints, lets a mind's associations replace a plot's logic, compresses a life into a single day or a single image, and mixes high poetry with advertising slogans and street speech. Poets rebuilt verse from images and cadence; novelists rebuilt narrative from consciousness itself.

Two broad temperaments run through American Modernism. One is expatriate and architectural: writers who left for London or Paris and built intricate works out of history, myth, and fragments of many languages. The other is domestic and demotic: writers who stayed and made art from American speech, jazz rhythms, small towns, and farmland. Both are responses to the same shock — the feeling that the inherited story no longer fitted the lived one — and students should be able to argue that shared origin even while preferring one temperament.

## 6.2 The Harlem Renaissance and the Claim to the Centre

In the nineteen-twenties, the New York neighbourhood of Harlem became the capital of a flowering of African American art, music, and literature whose importance cannot be overstated. Poets, novelists, and essayists of the Harlem Renaissance took the questions of this whole book — self-reliance, vernacular, the gap between America's promise and its practice — and pressed them from the position of citizens whose ancestors had been enslaved in the promised land. In our own words: its poets made sonnets and blues stanzas carry racial pride and protest at once; its novelists rendered Black interior life, in

all its classes and colours, with a fullness American fiction had rarely attempted; and its manifestos argued openly about art's duty — whether Black writing should serve the race's image, the artist's truth, or, as the best of it managed, both at once.

The movement's deepest legacy is structural. After Harlem, no honest account of American literature can treat African American writing as a side chapter. The same is true, in the decades that followed, for the literatures of Native American, Latino, Asian American, and women writers across every group — each arriving not as a supplement but as a correction to what the word American had been allowed to mean.

## 6.3 After the Second World War: Abundance and Argument

The later twentieth century is too rich for a single label, so learn it as a set of live arguments. Novelists of the postwar suburbs anatomised prosperity's emptiness. Southern writers carried Hawthorne's inheritance of guilt and history into new generations. Jewish American novelists made the immigrant family's second generation a central American subject. The Beats rejected respectable form and respectability itself, in favour of spontaneity, the road, and spiritual hunger. Confessional poets turned Dickinson's private intensity outward into frank accounts of family, illness, and the self. Novelists from the American South, the Southwest borderlands, the Native nations, and the Asian diasporas rebuilt the map of where an American story can happen and whose English — or Spanish, or braid of languages — it can happen in.

Through all of it, the older writers of this book remain present as instruments. A contemporary poet slanting a truth is Dickinson's heir; a novelist trusting a vernacular narrator walks Twain's road; a memoirist testing the promise against the practice is arguing with Emerson. Literary history is not a museum. It is a toolbox that working writers still open.

## 6.4 Reading the Present With the Past in Hand

Your course will set its own modern texts. Approach any of them with four questions drawn from this book. First, what does this work take America to promise, and what practice does it set against the promise? Second, whose voice narrates, and what does that voice's language — standard, vernacular, braided — claim? Third, what form has the writer chosen or broken, and what truth does the choice make sayable? Fourth, which earlier American writer is this one answering, imitating, or refusing? A student who can answer those four questions about an unfamiliar text has learned the transferable skill this whole book exists to teach.

## Worked Example: Connecting a Modern Work to an Earlier Chapter

**Task plan:** Your set modern novel is narrated by a young woman who moves between two languages and two countries, and who keeps a private notebook of unsent letters. Plan an essay connecting it to this book's earlier chapters.

**A model plan:** Open with Dickinson: the notebook of unsent letters is the modern drawer of poems — private writing whose slantness tells truths the public voice cannot, and your first section can analyse one notebook passage for compression and indirection. Turn next to Twain: the narrator's braided, unpolished voice claims, as the river novel claimed, that truth does not require official English; compare how each book certifies its narrator. Close with Chapter One's instrument: name the promise the novel invokes — belonging in the adopted country — and the practices, at borders and in classrooms, set against it. Three sections, three inheritances, one thesis: the modern book is new in its circumstances and legible in its lineage. This planning method — find the inheritance, prove it in the language, end at the promise — will organise essays on almost any modern set text.

## Exercises

41. Name four things Modernist writing does to inherited forms.
42. In your own words, what did the Harlem Renaissance argue about, among its own artists, and what is its deepest structural legacy?
43. Give three examples from section 6.3 of communities or movements that remade postwar American writing, with one phrase on what each contributed.
44. State the four questions section 6.4 advises asking of any modern text.

## Answer Guidance

45. Any four of: breaking chronology; multiplying viewpoints; replacing plot logic with association and consciousness; compressing a life into a day or an image; mixing high and low diction and materials. Each should be described as a response to a world the old forms no longer fitted.
46. Its artists argued about art's duty — whether writing should present the race favourably, follow the artist's individual truth, or achieve both. Its structural legacy is that African American writing can never again honestly be treated as a side chapter; it stands at the centre of the national literature, and later widenings follow its pattern.
47. Accept any three with accurate phrases: for example, postwar suburban novelists anatomising prosperity; the Beats rejecting respectability for spontaneity and the road; confessional poets making private life frank public material; borderlands,

Native, or Asian American novelists rebuilding the map and the languages of the American story.

48. What promise does the work invoke, and what practice opposes it? Whose voice narrates, and what does its language claim? What form is chosen or broken, and what does that make sayable? Which earlier writer is being answered, imitated, or refused?

## Conclusion: Reading America on the Page

You began with a country arguing itself into being, and you end with a literature still arguing — which is to say, still alive. If the argument has a centre, it is the one Emerson named and every later writer revised: the worth of the individual voice against the pressure of the crowd, the institution, and the inherited word. Hawthorne heard that voice in a guilty conscience at twilight. Melville sent it to sea with an unanswerable question. Whitman multiplied it until it contained a nation; Dickinson refined it until a single room held infinity; Twain gave it a boy's grammar and a nation's conscience; and the modern writers of Chapter Six handed it to citizens the first formulations had overlooked, who made it say new things in new forms.

Take from this book a method more than a set of opinions. Define your terms. Quote briefly, from the text in front of you, and read the image before you reach for the theme. Follow a symbol as it changes. Ask whose voice is speaking and what its language claims. Name the promise, and the practice set against it. A reader who can do those things can walk into any American text — set, unseen, or not yet written — and begin.

### Final Self-Test

Answer briefly, then check against the chapters.

49. What gap organises much American literary analysis? (Chapter One)
50. What does Emerson's iron string image claim about the self? (Chapter Two)
51. Why must an essay on Hawthorne's letter trace change over time? (Chapter Three)
52. Contrast Whitman's and Dickinson's solutions to the size of the self. (Chapter Four)
53. How does comedy function in Twain's river novel? (Chapter Five)
54. What four questions should you ask of a modern text? (Chapter Six)

**Guidance:** 1. The gap between America's promise — freedom, equality, opportunity — and its practice. 2. The self is an instrument under discipline: struck by truth, it sounds truly; self-reliance is responsiveness, not whim. 3. Because the letter's meaning is remade by time, conduct, and communal memory; a fixed reading repeats the error the novel criticises. 4. Whitman expands the self to contain multitudes in long, inclusive lines; Dickinson deepens it in compressed, slant utterance from a single room. 5. Comedy is the delivery system for a moral education: laughter keeps the reader aboard while the narrator's conscience grows. 6. The four questions of section 6.4: promise and practice; narrating voice and its claim; form chosen or broken; and the earlier writer being answered.

## Glossary

- **Aphorism:** A short, pointed statement of a general truth, designed to be remembered and carried away.
- **Canon:** The body of works generally recognised and taught as the significant literature of a place or period; canons change as readers argue.
- **Catalogue:** In Whitman's verse, a long list of people, places, or things whose accumulation itself makes an argument.
- **Confessional poetry:** Poetry that speaks frankly, in a first person close to the poet's own life, about family, illness, and private experience.
- **Free verse:** Poetry without regular metre or rhyme, organised instead by breath, cadence, and image.
- **Modernism:** The early twentieth-century movement that experimented with form, time, and viewpoint in response to a rapidly changing world.
- **Naturalism:** A form of fiction holding that lives are conditioned by heredity, environment, and chance, studied with near-scientific detachment.
- **Realism:** Fiction devoted to the exact observation of ordinary life, leaving room for moral choice.
- **Romance:** In Hawthorne's usage, a long fiction claiming latitude between fact and imagination to reveal the truth of the human heart.
- **Slant rhyme:** Rhyme that almost matches — near-consonance rather than full chime — often used by Dickinson for an effect of thought at an angle.
- **Symbol:** An object, mark, or figure that gathers meanings beyond itself, often changing as a work proceeds.
- **Transcendentalism:** The movement associated with Emerson holding that truth is apprehended by intuition and the soul, with nature as its great teacher and symbol.
- **Vernacular:** The ordinary spoken language of a place and class, as distinct from official or literary language.

## A Short Shelf for Further Reading

Read the works themselves, in full. Public-domain works are widely available in free editions.

- Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance" and "Nature" — public domain.
- Nathaniel Hawthorne, his scarlet-letter romance and his tales — public domain.
- Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick* and his shorter tales — public domain.
- Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, including "Song of Myself" — public domain.
- Emily Dickinson, her collected poems — public domain in the early editions; read a selection slowly.
- Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* — public domain.
- For the twentieth century, ask your teacher which Harlem Renaissance, Modernist, and contemporary texts are set for your course, and read those in full in their authorised editions; this book has discussed them in its own words.

*End of American Literature — From the Library of Maggie Enow*