

TO THE STUDENT xi

UNIT 1

EARLY AMERICAN LITERATURE: AN ERA OF CHANGE		xiv
1	LITERATURE OF SETTLEMENT	6
	THE IROQUOIS CONFEDERACY	8
	from <i>How the World Began</i>	10
	from <i>The Constitution of the Five Nations (The Iroquois Constitution)</i>	18
	Arthur C. Parker	22
	JOHN SMITH	23
	from <i>The General History of Virginia, New England, and the Summer Isles</i>	25
	from <i>A Description of New England</i>	28
	WILLIAM BRADFORD	31
	from <i>Of Plymouth Plantation</i>	33
	JOHN WINTHROP	39
	from <i>Journal</i>	41
	from <i>A Model of Christian Charity</i>	44
	MARY ROWLANDSON	46
	from <i>A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson</i>	48
2	LITERATURE OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE	54
	ROGER WILLIAMS/THE BAY PSALM BOOK	56
	from <i>A Key into the Language of America</i>	58
	Psalm 23 from <i>The Bay Psalm Book</i>	59
	ANNE BRADSTREET	61
	<i>The Author to Her Book</i>	63
	from <i>Contemplations</i>	64
	<i>Here Follows Some Verses upon the Burning of Our House</i>	66
	<i>To My Dear and Loving Husband</i>	68
	EDWARD TAYLOR	69
	<i>Meditation 6 (First Series)</i>	71
	<i>Huswifery</i>	71
	from <i>God's Determinations: The Preface</i>	72
	<i>Upon a Spider Catching a Fly</i>	74
	JONATHAN EDWARDS	76
	from <i>Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God</i>	78
	TWO RESPONSES TO RELIGION	86
	<i>Samson Occom</i> <i>A Short Narrative of My Life</i>	89
	<i>Red Jacket</i> <i>The Great Spirit Has Made Us All</i>	94
3	LITERATURE OF REVOLUTION	98
	BENJAMIN FRANKLIN	100
	from <i>The Autobiography</i>	102
	PATRICK HENRY	112
	<i>Give Me Liberty, or Give Me Death!</i>	114
	THOMAS PAINE	117
	from <i>The Crisis</i> , No. 1	119
	from <i>The Age of Reason</i>	123

THOMAS JEFFERSON	126
<i>from Autobiography</i>	128
PHILLIS WHEATLEY	134
To the University of Cambridge in New-England	136
On Being Brought from Africa to America	137

UNIT 2

AMERICAN ROMANTICISM: AN ERA OF OPTIMISM		140
4	MINOR ROMANTICS	146
	WASHINGTON IRVING	148
	Rip Van Winkle	150
	JAMES FENIMORE COOPER	163
	<i>from The Deerslayer</i>	165
	WILLIAM CULLEN BRYANT	172
	Thanatopsis	174
	To a Waterfowl	176
	HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW	178
	A Psalm of Life	179
	Mezzo Cammin	180
	JOHN GREENLEAF WHITTIER	181
	Ichabod	182
	First-Day Thoughts	182
	JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL	184
	<i>from A Fable for Critics</i>	185
	The Courtin'	187
	OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES	189
	Old Ironsides	190
	The Chambered Nautilus	191
5	MAJOR ROMANTICS	194
	RALPH WALDO EMERSON	196
	<i>from Nature</i>	198
	<i>from Self-Reliance</i>	199
	HENRY DAVID THOREAU	202
	<i>from Civil Disobedience</i>	204
	<i>from Walden</i>	206
	WALT WHITMAN	212
	<i>from Song of Myself</i>	214
	I Hear America Singing	216
	A Noiseless Patient Spider	216
	O Captain! My Captain!	217
	EDGAR ALLAN POE	219
	The Raven	221
	Annabel Lee	225
	The Cask of Amontillado	226

NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE	232
The Minister's Black Veil: A Parable	234
The Birthmark	243
HERMAN MELVILLE	255
Bartleby, the Scrivener	257
6 VOICES OF CONFLICT	282
ABRAHAM LINCOLN	284
Address at the Dedication of the Gettysburg National Cemetery	286
Second Inaugural Address	287
AMBROSE BIERCE	289
An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge	291
FREDERICK DOUGLASS	298
from <i>Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave</i>	299
NEGRO SPIRITUALS	302
Go Down, Moses	303
UNIT 3	
AMERICAN REALISM AND NATURALISM: AN ERA OF NEW BEGINNINGS	
	306
7 REGIONALISTS	312
BRET HARTE	314
The Boom in the <i>Calaveras Clarion</i>	316
JAMES WHITCOMB RILEY	326
When the Frost Is on the Punkin	327
SARAH ORNE JEWETT	328
A White Heron	330
EMILY DICKINSON	338
This is my letter to the World	340
The Soul selects her own Society	340
Much Madness is divinest Sense	341
Hope is the thing with feathers	342
There is no Frigate like a Book	342
I like to see it lap the Miles	343
She sweeps with many-colored Brooms	344
A narrow Fellow in the Grass	344
The Bustle in a House	345
Because I could not stop for Death	346
I heard a Fly buzz—when I died	346
KATE CHOPIN	348
Désirée's Baby	350
8 REALISTS AND NATURALISTS	356
HENRY JAMES	358
from <i>The American</i>	360
MARK TWAIN	377
from <i>The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</i>	379

WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS	394
Editha	396
STEPHEN CRANE	406
God fashioned the ship of the world carefully	408
A man said to the universe	408
The Open Boat	409
JACK LONDON	426
The Law of Life	428

UNIT 4

MODERN AMERICAN LITERATURE: AN ERA OF PESSIMISM 434

9 MODERN POETRY	440
EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON	442
Miniver Cheevy	444
Richard Cory	447
ROBERT FROST	448
The Gift Outright	450
The Road Not Taken	451
The Death of the Hired Man	452
Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening	457
Mending Wall	459
Birches	460
EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY	462
Sonnet XXVI	463
IMAGISTS	464
Ezra Pound In a Station of the Metro	466
William Carlos Williams The Red Wheelbarrow	466
H.D. Heat	467
Archibald MacLeish Ars Poetica	467
T. S. ELIOT	469
Journey of the Magi	470
CARL SANDBURG	472
Chicago	474
Fog	476
Grass	476
E. E. CUMMINGS	478
Somewhere i have never travelled	480
In Just-	481
r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r	482
THEODORE ROETHKE	483
My Papa's Waltz	484
Dolor	485
HARLEM RENAISSANCE POETS	486
Claude McKay If We Must Die	489
America	489
Countée Cullen Yet Do I Marvel	490
Langston Hughes Harlem [2]	491
I, Too	491
Dream Variations	492

10 MODERN PROSE	494
ZORA NEALE HURSTON	496
How It Feels to Be Colored Me	498
JAMES THURBER	501
The Catbird Seat	502
E. B. WHITE	508
Once More to the Lake	510
F. SCOTT FITZGERALD	515
Winter Dreams	517
ERNEST HEMINGWAY	534
In Another Country	536
THORNTON WILDER	540
The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden	542
JOHN STEINBECK	555
Flight	557
EUDORA WELTY	570
A Worn Path	571

UNIT 5

CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN LITERATURE: AN ERA OF DIVERSITY	578
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11 CONTEMPORARY POETRY	582	
ELIZABETH BISHOP	584	
The Fish	585	
One Art	587	
RANDALL JARRELL	588	
The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner	589	
WILLIAM STAFFORD	590	
With Kit, Age 7, at the Beach	591	
Bess	592	
AFRICAN AMERICAN POETS LAUREATE	593	
Robert Hayden	Frederick Douglass	595
Gwendolyn Brooks	Life for my child is simple, and is good	596
	The Explorer	597
Rita Dove	Rosa	598
SYLVIA PLATH	599	
You're	600	
Stillborn	601	
BILLY COLLINS	602	
Introduction to Poetry	603	
Workshop	604	
LI-YOUNG LEE	606	
Eating Alone	607	
Eating Together	608	

12 CONTEMPORARY PROSE	610
RAY BRADBURY	612
August 2026: There Will Come Soft Rains	613
FLANNERY O'CONNOR	618
<i>from A Prayer Journal</i>	619
The Life You Save May Be Your Own	621
JOHN UPDIKE	628
Still of Some Use	629
JOYCE CAROL OATES	633
Murder	634
ALICE WALKER	638
My Mother's Blue Bowl	639
AMY TAN	642
Two Kinds	643
SANDRA CISNEROS	651
Straw into Gold: The Metamorphosis of the Everyday	652
Glossary	656
Works Cited	662
Public Domain Works	666
Illustrators	667
Photo Credits	668
Index	670

TO THE STUDENT

AMERICAN LITERATURE presents the storytelling and writing of America from its beginnings to the present. It covers the historical context, literary movements, and principal players of a dynamic heritage that remains a vital expression of the heart and soul of the American people. It also tells the story of a culture steadily shifting from essential agreement with God's Word to a rejection of Truth.

Cultural Literacy

An important goal for any American literature textbook is to expose students to authors and works that have exerted influence on American culture and society—to develop, in other words, cultural literacy. We want you to understand where ideas come from, especially ideas that shape how Americans think. This text will help you to understand America by understanding its literature. One way the book accomplishes this goal is by tracing core American values—freedom, growth, equality, and individualism—through the literature.

This account of American literature is a chronological study. You will study authors and their works roughly in the order they appeared in history. This approach helps you to track historical trends and influences and see how one stage of American literature led to the next. What writers say (their themes) and how they express themselves (their styles) are powerfully dependent upon their times. Most writers, in fact, are affected by their times more than they realize. The unit and chapter essays in this text will provide you with a historical framework before you examine the works themselves. Similarly, background/biography sections provide helpful context for individual pieces and authors.

Reading Process

Each lesson is broken down into three stages: Before, During, and After Reading.

The **Before Reading** section highlights some key aspects of the literature selection for you. It identifies and explains important literary concepts, defines some of the challenging vocabulary you will encounter, and helps orient you to the work and how it will be discussed.

The **During Reading** section presents the literature and uses margin questions to draw your attention to the emphases outlined in the Before Reading instruction and encourage you to think about these aspects as you read the work.

The **After Reading** section includes Think and Discuss questions that review and assess your comprehension of the Before and During Reading emphases as well as other prominent features and ideas connected to the literary work. At the end of each chapter, a chapter review outlines important concepts to help you prepare for testing.

Biblical Worldview

American poet Emily Dickinson famously said, "I see New Englandly," meaning that how she saw the world was fundamentally shaped by her identity as a New Englander. One purpose of this text is to help you see "Christianly." Like other literature courses, this study focuses on interpretation (what does the work mean?) and technical analysis (how does it say what it means?), but it also presents a third focus—biblical evaluation. We desire to teach you to use your Christian worldview to determine how biblically sound a work is—that is, how does its message conform to or diverge from biblical truth? Thus, you will be challenged to evaluate literature in the light of Scripture—especially when authors' philosophies contradict the Word of God. The practice of applying a Christian worldview should help you to become discerning and Christlike in your approach not only to American literature but to life itself.

A Christian Motivation

All that a Christian does should be motivated by a desire to serve others through good works (Matt. 5:14–16; Mark 12:31). This includes the work of developing knowledge and skill in the study of American literature. As you learn to analyze and evaluate works of literature, you will become more skilled at helping others interpret novels, films, and cultural movements. For this reason, as you evaluate works of literature from a Christian worldview, you should be trying to help your brothers and sisters in Christ "be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine" (Eph. 4:14). We also serve others through the creativity we develop in the study of literature. You may never write novels (or you may!), but you will likely have the chance to tell stories to your children or at your church's VBS or write poetry to a loved one. These are important human experiences that can be enriched by gaining knowledge and skill in the study of literature.

All that a Christian does should also be motivated by a desire to declare the glory of God (Rom. 11:36)—even learning about American literature. How does such learning help declare God's glory? By learning about literary expression, the Christian develops greater ability to worship God through literature. The Psalter is a book of prayers, but it is also a book of poetry. Within American literature (especially among the Puritans), we find examples of this application of literary knowledge and skill. When Christians engage in the creative act, they mirror the Creator. The creativity and skills fostered by your study of literature may lead you to more effectively declare God's glory through your own writing, private or public. What you learn in this class should lead you to worship God in a richer way.



chapter
4

MINOR ROMANTICS

1775 1800 1825 1850 1875 1900

1820–65—American Romanticism



KNICKERBOCKERS

Aided by the country's urban growth, groups of writers gathered in the literary capitals of the East. The writers centered in New York City formed a literary circle called the Knickerbockers, named after Diedrich Knickerbocker, the fictional historian of Washington Irving's comic *History of New York* and the storyteller of "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow." There were numerous members and contributors in the Knickerbockers, but included among them were two other figures besides Irving who have remained prominent in literary history: the novelist James Fenimore Cooper and the poet-critic-journalist William Cullen Bryant. The Knickerbocker School centered more on a geographic location (New York City) than it did on a particular stylistic or philosophic vein. Its members, however, did strive to create and promote a truly American literature. They also worked to turn New York into America's literary capital. *The Knickerbocker Magazine* was named in tribute to Irving, one of its chief contributors. Though not of the highest merit in its era, it was the first literary magazine in America to achieve permanence, running from 1833 to 1865.

It is the divine attribute of the imagination, that it is irrepressible, unconfined—that when the real world is shut out, it can create a world for itself, and . . . can conjure up glorious shapes and forms and brilliant visions, to make solitude populous, and irradiate the gloom of the dungeon.

—Washington Irving, "A Royal Poet," *The Sketch Book* (1820)

NEW ENGLAND SCHOOL

Another cluster of writers, the Boston-centered New England School, included Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Oliver Wendell Holmes, John Greenleaf Whittier, and James Russell Lowell. This group is often called the Household Poets, a name that reflects their immense popularity during the nineteenth century. They were the first group of poets to rival their English counterparts in notoriety—on either side of the Atlantic. They are also called the Schoolroom Poets because their works were extensively taught in schools well into the twentieth century. Their many poems featuring scenes from American domestic life inspired yet another name—the Fireside Poets. When called by these descriptive names, this group also includes the Knickerbocker poet William Cullen Bryant. Like the Knickerbockers, these writers drew on life in America for much of their material. They composed poems on American political issues, such as slavery, and long narrative works set in America's legends or history. Though they favored traditional forms over experimentation, these poets popularized for the American public many of the common romantic attitudes and themes.

*Art is the child of Nature; yes,
Her darling child, in whom we trace
The features of the mother's face.
.....
He is the greatest artist, then,
Whether of pencil or of pen,
Who follows Nature.*

—Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, "Kéramos" (1878)

Washington Irving

1783–1859

The collection of essays and tales called *The Sketch Book* made Washington Irving the first American writer to achieve international fame. A deliberate literary craftsman who sought to entertain his readers, he was also America's first professional man of letters.

The Satiric Knickerbocker

Although trained as a lawyer and destined to work, though reluctantly, in his family's mercantile firm, Irving early revealed literary promise. While cultivating the appearance of a fashionable young man about town, he wrote a series of satiric newspaper essays (1802–3) and published the *Salmagundi* papers (1807–8). In 1809 he published his first major work, *A History of New York*, supposedly written by an old, eccentric historian named Diedrich Knickerbocker, one of Irving's fictional identities. Comically treating the New York Dutch and their tradition, this mock history pleased many but vexed the stately Dutch families. Irving's satire undercut the pretensions of these families in particular and of historians in general. It marked out Irving's future course as well, for the work, written solely for entertainment, taught no serious moral lessons. Also in 1809 came the death of his fiancée, Matilda Hoffman. Her death probably accounted for the melancholy cast over much of the rest of his life and work.



Irving gave New York City its nickname, Gotham, which means "goat town."

Sketchbook Artist Abroad

In 1815 Irving's career shifted to Europe. He sailed for England to take charge of the Liverpool branch of the family business. When the firm went bankrupt in 1818, he threw himself totally into a literary career. His travels throughout Europe stimulated his imagination. He wrote sketchbooks, collections of short pieces, on various countries as well as a study of Columbus that remained the standard biography for a hundred years. He also wrote two popular American short stories: "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow."

The Sketch Book, which includes both of his famous stories, was the pivotal work in his career. Irving reveals in its preface that Europe's storied past and its foreign and exotic settings strongly attracted him. In fact, only four selections in *The Sketch Book* are on genuinely American topics: two essays on Native Americans and his two memorable short stories.



The Sketch Book was published in England and America at the same time to prevent copyright piracy.



Dean of American Letters

In 1832 Irving returned to the United States, bringing with him a medal from the English Royal Society of Literature, an honorary degree from Oxford, and an established reputation both in America and abroad. As dean of American letters, he encouraged other writers and devoted himself to history and biography. He published biographies of Oliver Goldsmith and George Washington, for whom he had been named. He traveled west, writing of the picturesque prairie and of Astoria, the fur empire founded by John Jacob Astor. His fellow New Yorkers attempted to nominate him for mayor of New York City, but Irving declined. After serving in Spain as diplomatic attaché (1842–46), he moved to Sunnyside, his home near Tarrytown, New York. Here he continued to write until his death on November 28, 1859.

Possibly no writer's reputation has hung on so slender a thread as Irving's. His two most famous stories—"Rip Van Winkle" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow"—have both established and maintained that reputation. Often viewed as transitional, Irving's work marked a clear break in American literature. Its goal was no longer moral or religious instruction but entertainment. His style was smooth and urbane, his material pleasurable and innocent. As humorist and folklorist, Irving brought new materials and directions to American literature.

AT A GLANCE

- 1809 Published *A History of New York*
- 1815–32 Lived in Europe
- 1819–20 Published *The Sketch Book*, first serially, then as a book
- 1826–32 Served in the American legation in Spain and England
- 1828 Published a biography of Columbus
- 1842–46 Returned to diplomatic service in Spain
- 1848 Arranged for a revised edition of his works
- 1855–59 Published a five-volume biography of George Washington