

TEXTOS DOCENTS

229

THE LITERATURE OF THE UNITED STATES: VOICES OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Rodrigo Andrés
Teresa Requena

Departament de Filologia Anglesa i Alemanya



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UNIVERSITAT DE BARCELONA

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“[...] an island far away to the West and South. It is not down in any map; true places never are.”

Herman Melville. *Moby-Dick*, 1851.

“[America is] now the oldest country in the world because [...] America created the twentieth century, and since all the other countries are now either living or commencing to be living a twentieth century of life [...] America having begun the creation of the twentieth century in [...] the nineteenth century is now the oldest country in the world.”

Gertrude Stein. *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, 1933.

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INTRODUCTION

This book is a guide to “Introducció a la Literatura dels Estats Units”, a course offered by the American Studies area of the English Department at the Universitat de Barcelona. It surveys the literary movements of the United States in the nineteenth century through a selection of texts which includes poetry, short fiction and novels written by men and women of different ethnic backgrounds, social classes and geographical areas.

The Literature of the United States: Voices of the Nineteenth Century is organized around chapters that complement the materials discussed in class. Each chapter begins with a series of “food for thought” questions meant to stimulate the active reading of the texts as well as to engage skills in critical analysis. The chapter is structured around a series of sections providing information about the author in his / her historical context, guidelines for the analysis of the texts, and suggestions for further research through a list of general bibliography and on-line resources, as well as through a number of open questions that suggest connections between different literary texts.

This book is the result of our class experiences. We would therefore like to thank students for having contributed to enriching the course with their responses, suggestions and feedback. This book is dedicated to them.

We invite you to enjoy further explorations of American literature through the other courses in the area of American Studies:

“Història i Cultures dels Estats Units”

“Modernitat i Literatura als Estats Units”

“Contracultures de Posguerra als Estats Units”

“Multiculturalisme, Gènere i Cinema als Estats Units”

.....
“Literatures and Cultures of the USA”

“Multiculturalisme a la Literatura i el Cinema dels Estats Units”

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<<http://americanliterature.dukejournals.org/>>

The American Poetry Review

<<http://sumaris.cbuc.es/cgi/revista.cgi?issn=0360-3709>>

American Quarterly

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/american_quarterly/>

Critical Quarterly

<<http://www.blackwell-synergy.com/loi/crq>>

Melus (Multi-Ethnic Literatures of the U.S.)

<<http://www.jstor.org/journals/0163755X.html>>

Modern Fiction Studies

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/modern_fiction_studies/>

Web Pages

<<http://www.csustan.edu/english/reuben/pal/table.html>>

<<http://americanstudies.georgetown.edu/>>

<<http://www.indiana.edu/~oah/connections>>

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<<http://www.colby.edu/amer.studies/>>
<<http://www.columbia.edu/cu/gsas/liberalstudies/americanstudies.html>>
<<http://www.arts.cornell.edu/amerstud>>
<<http://web.princeton.edu/sites/amstudies/>>
<<http://www.cla.purdue.edu/american-studies/>>
<<http://www.wm.edu/americanstudies/index.php>>
<<http://www.units.muohio.edu/americanstudies/>>
<<http://ls.berkeley.edu/dept/as/>>
<<http://www.britannica.com>>
<<http://www.amst.umd.edu/>>
<<http://www.georgetown.edu/faculty/bassr/heath/>>

PRE-CIVIL WAR LITERATURE: 1800-1865

1. HISTORICAL CONDITIONS

- 4th of July 1776: Declaration of Independence.

- Beginning of the century:

Quick growth, arrival of large numbers of immigrants: consolidation of a multicultural society.

Reform movements; Abolitionism, women's rights.

- The Westward expansion: The Manifest Destiny.
- The Industrial Revolution: Transformation of the country.

2. NATIVE AMERICAN ORAL PRODUCTION

“No holocaust in this millennium has been more destructive, and no survivors more helplessly victimized long after the shooting ended. [...] The United States rebuilt Germany, but what has it done to the Native nations? [...] These stories demonstrate the Indian slogan ‘We shall endure’, powerfully and tellingly. Although we’ve been disappeared from American consciousness we never go away” (Allen 24).

“[...] because political conquest necessarily involves intellectual conquest, educational institutions in this country have prevented people from studying the great works of minority cultures in light of critical structures that could illuminate and clarify those materials in their own contexts”(Allen 3).

- The oral transmission as a literary form.

“The stories in the oral tradition follow certain aesthetic processes that differ from the processes employed in the modern Western tradition [...]” (Allen 2).

- Formal elements of oral narratives.

- Themes.

“The white Anglo-Saxon secular-Protestant ethos holds that isolate, self-reliant, and self-motivated individuals formulate and render experience personal, profiting thereby. The ideal hero, a single individual, wreaks his will upon one or more hapless groups (who, one way or another, are generally perceived as in opposition to individualistic goals). He does so by means of engaging in conflict, bringing it to crisis, and resolving that crisis in such a way that individualistic values are affirmed. [...] Western critical standards, as they apply to the short story, have also been shaped by the ‘three unities’ – unity of time, place, and action – that Aristotle described. Unity and singularity are allied concepts, and it is the difference in perception of the significance of a people’s collective experience that distinguishes American Indian short stories from non-Indian American ones.

In the Western canon, the classic short story has one hero and one theme. It is ideally situated in one geographic location and the action occurs in a brief time-frame. [...] But the Indian ethos is neither individualistic nor conflict-centered, and the unifying structures that make the oral tradition coherent are less a matter of character, time, and setting than the coherence of common understanding derived from the ritual tradition that members of a tribal unit share. The horrors that visit an Indian who attempts isolate individuality have been movingly depicted. [...] This concentration on the negative effects of individuality forms a major theme in the oral literatures of all tribes. In past as in present narratives, even socially encouraged experiences of isolation end with the isolate’s reconnection with the community.

In all of these stories the underlying theme is about forced separation, signifying the loss of self and loss of personal meaning. Separation as loss (rather than as maturation or liberation) is a theme found all over Native America in both pre-contact and modern forms.

Right relationship, or right kinship, is fundamental to Native aesthetics. Right relationship is dictated by custom within a given tribal or cultural grouping, but everywhere it is characterized by considerations of proportion, harmony, balance, and community.

What this signifies is a fundamental difference between the Western and the tribal sense of the beautiful. As mentioned earlier, singularity of consciousness is a central characteristic of modern Western fiction. [...] One thinks of [...] Gilman, Mansfield, Twain, Hemingway, Hawthorne, and even Faulkner. But in the Indian way, singularity is antithetical to community. [...] In such a system, individualism (as distinct from autonomy or self-responsibility) becomes a negatively valued trait. Nor does the tribal community of relatives end with human kin: the supernaturals, spirit people, animal people of all varieties, the thunders, snows, rains, rivers, lakes, hills, mountains, fire, water, rock, and plants are perceived to be members of one’s community. [...] Harmony, relationship, balance, and dignity are its informing principles because they are the principles that inform our spiritual lives” (Allen 5-11).

“Intertextuality, for Indians, is use of tradition. [...] The integral relationship between the contemporary oral tradition (told-to-people stories) and the told-to-the-page one requires inclusion of told-to-people stories, so that readers unfamiliar with tribal oral traditions and with the traditions’ relationship to modern stories can get a sense of how the two modes of Indian narrative literature respectfully intertwine. [...] In the Western

tradition, 'creativity' is thought to be a personal talent, arising without respect to the cultural matrix the creator lives in, a concept derived from the concept of private ownership. Ideas are seen as property, and the one who owns them is thought to be the legal beneficiary of whatever payments might accrue to the use of the ideas. This assumption also leads to the peculiar belief that myth and fiction are synonymous with lying, which does not seem so far-fetched when writers claim to have 'made up' of 'invented' their work.

The collective unconscious, while culture-specific in most particulars, is the ever-renewing source of all of our stories" (Allen 21-23).

3. LITERATURES IN SPANISH

- "In 1848 Mexico signed the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, ending the war between Mexico and the United States and giving over to the United States all of the territory that encompasses the present states of Arizona, Nevada, Utah, New Mexico, California, and part of Colorado (Texas had already become an independent territory in the Revolution of 1836). By the terms of the treaty, the Mexicans then living in that region could remain and become American citizens with the right to retain their language and culture. Many chose to return to Mexico but more stayed, and today the majority of the almost eight million Chicanos in America live in the Southwest. Their proximity to Mexico and the ease of two-way travel across the border has made it possible for Chicanos to remain fairly bilingual and bicultural. These factors of proximity and mobility between cultures, however, have also been the instruments of their isolation from the mainstream of American culture, and they have been forced economically and educationally into America's second largest minority group. Neither Mexico nor America claims the descendants of the original inhabitants of the Southwest. In spite of this marginal position between two cultures – or perhaps because of it – Chicanos have forged a distinct culture of their own and created a unique literature that fuses characteristics from their Indian, Spanish, and Anglo-American heritage. Their literature abounds with linguistic innovations; new sounds and rhythms are created by the juxtapositions of English with Spanish and even with Nahuatl. Myth informs symbolism, and folklore and legends influence genre and theme" (Fisher. "Introduction").

4. THE LITERARY MARKET

4.1. *Finding a Voice*

- The first decades of the 19th century dominated by the need to find a distinctive national voice clearly distinguished from Britain.
- Feeling of cultural inferiority sponsored by European critics.

"Literature, the Americans have none, in the four corners of the world, who reads an American book? Or goes to an American play?" (Sydney Smith. *The Edinburgh Review*, 1820).

- In opposition, writers and scholars in the United States try to foster a notion of national pride and specific literary identity.
- Debate about the need to find a cultural independence that parallels the political one.

“A specifically *American* literary identity, including that of women, did not spring up spontaneously with residence on American shores, but was developed in response to English and European sneers at our national cultural inferiority” (Showalter 10).

“We will walk with our own feet, we will work with our own hands, we will speak our own minds” (Ralph Waldo Emerson. “The American Scholar”).

“But why are we so exquisitely alive to the aspersions of England? Why do we suffer ourselves to be so affected by the contumely she has endeavored to cast upon us? It is not the opinion of England alone that honor lives and reputation has its being. [...] For ourselves, therefore, it is comparatively of but little importance whether England does us justice or not – it is perhaps of far more importance to herself” (Washington Irving. “English Writers on America.” 46).

“We must discard all models. The Elizabethan theatre should be abandoned. We need thoughts of our own – principles of dramatic action drawn not from the ‘old dramatists’ but from the Fountain of Nature that can never grow old” (Edgar Allan Poe. In Wilmeth and Bigsby. 8).

“There are minds that have gone as far as Shakespeare into the universe. [...] You must believe in Shakespeare's unapproachability, or quit the country. But what sort of a belief is this for an American, a man who is bound to carry republican progressiveness into Literature, as well as into Life? Believe me my friends, that Shakespeares are this day being born on the banks of the Ohio. And the day will come, when you shall say who reads a book by an Englishman that is a modern? The great mistake seems to be, that even with those Americans who look forward to the coming of a great literary genius among us, they somehow fancy he will come in the costume of Queen Elizabeth's day, – be a writer of dramas founded upon old English history, or the tales of Boccaccio. Whereas, great geniuses are parts of the times; they themselves are the times; and possess a corresponding coloring” (Herman Melville. “Hawthorne and his Mosses.” *Heath*. Vol. 1. 2619).

“[The drama of Shakespeare] cannot match Yellowstone geysers, or Colorado ravines and when ordinary people made their appearance it was only as capital foils to the aristocracy or as the divertissement only of the elite of the castle. The comedies are altogether non-acceptable to America and Democracy” (Walt Whitman. In Wilmeth and Bigsby. 9).

- Lack of cultural support for creative activities.
- 1820s. Beginning of professionalism. Transformation in the means of producing and distributing of literature in the United States. Growth of a literary market. Growth of readership.

Washington Irving	<i>The Sketch Book</i> , 1819-20
James Fenimore Cooper	<i>The Spy</i> , 1821; <i>The Last of the Mohicans</i> , 1826
William Cullen Bryant	Poetry

- The 1830s and 40s: Historical novelists, magazines, Southern writers, women writers, Gothic fictions.
- The 1850s. "The Great American Renaissance". The first great literary generation. Construction of the literary canon.

4.2. The Development of the Novel in The United States

4.2.1. The Novel in Europe

Miguel de Cervantes	<i>Don Quijote</i> , 1605, 1615
Daniel Defoe	<i>Moll Flanders</i> , 1722
Samuel Richardson	<i>Pamela</i> , 1740
Henry Fielding	<i>Joseph Andrews</i> , 1742
Laurence Sterne	<i>The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy</i> , 1760 – 67

4.2.2. The Novel in the United States

William Hill Brown	<i>The Power of Sympathy; or, the triumph of Nature</i> , 1789
Susanna Haswell Rowson	<i>Charlotte Temple</i> , London 1791, U. S. 1794
Hannah Foster	<i>The Coquette</i> , 1797
Charles Brockden Brown	<i>Wieland</i> , 1799; <i>Ormond</i> , 1799

"[The new middle classes] demanded a form that would be really their own, a mass-produced commodity to be bought or rented in the market-place like other goods, a thick and substantial item to be placed on the table with other evidences of their wealth and taste. The novel is the first large-scale example of 'mass art'. [...] Not intended for recitation or performance in the fields or at the courts like verse, not intended for public production like drama, the novel belongs to an era when literature came to be thought of as something enjoyed in loneliness. The family reading aloud in the patriarchal parlor for a time challenged but could not really destroy the concept of reading as a retreat to privacy - in the closet, the boudoir, the toilet, last of refuges, the point is the same. Literature, which had originally served to enhance the sense of community, bringing shoulder to shoulder a representative audience, before the storyteller or at the open-air tragic festival, now served only to make possible the simultaneous solitude of thousands of readers. Mass production and lonely consumption – these are the hallmarks of a new age. The process that had begun with the move into an indoor, darkened theater reached its climax in the novel, that private theater in the innermost darkness of the individual mind" (Fiedler 43-44).