

Literature as a revolutionary tool for american

[History](#), [Revolution](#)



In tandem with literacy, literature has become one of the leading vehicles for social criticism in American history. It amplifies the author's voice, reverberating it throughout the nation, molding the history of America by changing the opinions of the people on certain issues. It can induce cries of hope and merriment, like John Winthrop's sermon *A Model of Christian Charity*, which speaks about the optimistic prospect of America as the "City upon a Hill" (Winthrop, 84). But it can also elicit the noticeable cries viciously pointing out the ignored flaws embedded in this "more perfect union" (U. S. Const. Preamble) the existence of slavery, racism, ethnocentrism and the absence of gender equality. While reading this textbook, it is important to keep in mind the question of intention why a certain piece of literature was written and why during that particular time period and not another. In any case, major movements in American literature leading up to the 19th Century are not arbitrary or random; they are all interrelated by a cause and effect, wherein one movement inspires the critical response of another.

The arrival of the Puritans in the sixteenth century brought religious literature into the New World, more specifically sermons such as John Winthrop's *A Model of Christian Charity*, which grounded the principles required for this infant colony to become the "City Upon A Hill" (Winthrop, 84). Winthrop's sermon was an implicated work of criticism towards the European structure of society, where social class and bloodline would inherently determine a person's fate in life.

Winthrop modeled prospective America according to everything the Old World was not it would be a country where the "riche and mighty should

not eat up the poore, nor the poore," (81) where the people " must love one another with a pure hearte fervently... eare one another burthens... [and] not looke only on [their] owne things, but also on the things of [their] brethren" (83). This model appealed to the serfs and peasants of Europe because it promoted equality, a concept not unfamiliar but unattainable to the people belonging to the Old World.

Although inequality established by the Old World caste system would later be abolished in the New World, gender inequality still remained to be a prevalent form of inequality amongst the people" notice that Winthrop calls out for equality among the " brethren" (83) and not " sistren," which is the female equivalent of it. Over two centuries later, Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* would be published in 1850, criticizing the gender inequality within the glorified Puritan " Model of Christian Charity. Hawthorne points out this flaw by having Hester Prynne, the woman, repent for her sins by public shame and ostracization whereas Dimmesdale, the man, can successfully conceal his sins, albeit it at a great cost in the end. This disparity between the experiences of the opposite sex point out the imperfections within Puritan society as well as society in the 19th century. On the topic of inequality, accompanied by women were black slaves who received the shortest end of the stick of equality.

Following the American Independence in 1774, early 19th century American literature mainly comprised of political documents such as The Declaration of Independence of 1776, which was written with the intention to " petition for redress" (US, 1776), which in this case would be independence from the

British Crown. The document itself is a social critique on the monarchical system of the British Empire. By listing the " history of repeated injuries and usurpation" (US, 1776) inflicted upon the American Colonies, the drafters of The Declaration of

Independence are explicitly condemning the tyrannical Imperial System that dominated Europe and the Kingdom of Great Britain throughout history.

Almost a century later, the emergence of abolitionist sponsored slave narratives in the 19th century allowed for the direct critique of America's hypocritical claim that the British Crown" the " Tyrant"" was unfit to be the ruler of the " free people" which" later emphasized" excluded the black community.

While the fourth of July is often associated with the Joyful celebration of independence, in the perspective of prominent African-American abolitionist Fredrick Douglass, the fourth of July is eferred to as the particular day " that reveals to [the Negro]... the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim [of]" (Douglass, The Fourth of July). The " Fourth of July is yours [the white citizens], not mine [the blacks]" Douglass said in his 1852 speech " The Meaning of July Fourth to the Negro. His statement summarizes the fact that the basic rights the whites were born with were not considered as rights or even privileges for the blacks" free or enslaved. Fast-forward to postcivil warin 1983; Mark Twain publishes Pudd'nhead Wilson, a tragic comedy criticizing the lack of ights given to slaves. In the conclusion, the creditors of the Driscoll estate claim fake Tom as their " lawful property'

(Twain, 122). This reference to "property" can be viewed as criticism towards the Supreme Court Case *Dred Scott v.*

Stanford in 1857, where Judge Taney ruled Scott, the slave, as property and therefore cannot be freed, despite setting foot on a free state, because it would be depriving a person of property without due process or just compensation which violates the 5th Amendment. The comic tragedy of *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, then, serves as a critical *proprobrum* directed upon the inequitable ways in which the slaves were treated. The philosophical movement known as transcendentalism began its short, but impactful life during the 1820s and 1830s.

Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau are among the renowned icons of the transcendentalist movement. The transcendentalist movement began as criticism towards society and its institutions" particularly organized religion and political parties. Influenced by Romanticism, the transcendentalists respected the individual spirit and the natural world, believing that divinity was present in nature and each person. In his essay *Self-Reliance*, Emerson compares an institution to the "lengthened shadow of one man" (Emerson, 26).

Self-Reliance circles itself around the idea of Individualism where "imitation is suicide" (20), so this comparison suggests that organizations teach principles based on the ideas of a single person, forcing everyone else to conform to the ideas of a man other than themselves" a concept condemned by transcendentalists. Transcendentalism also included the core belief that all men were inherently good" a belief that would later breed a completely

different generation of writers. Herman Melville was among the writers who advocated realism, the antithesis of all things romantic or transcendental.

His novella *Bartleby* tells the story of a scrivener named Bartleby. Like Thoreau, Bartleby is a passive resistor. However, while Thoreau argues that his act of passive resistance frees him, Bartleby's passivity provokes the narrator to confront him, and ultimately, his refusal to accept authority results in his self-inflicted death. Furthermore, although Thoreau considers solitude as his most "companionable" (Thoreau, 88) companion, Bartleby's loneliness was the cause for his boss' comment on his "incurably forlorn" (Melville, 9) appearance.

The key difference between transcendentalism and realism isn't very far fetched" one is optimistic while the other is realistically grim" while Thoreau's passive resistance liberates him and allows him to fully express himself, Bartleby's passive resistance only affirms the authority and control that society has over him. Although the motives for social criticism may vary over the decades, the overall purpose of literature is to act as a vessel for social criticism in order to spark movements" for better or worse" in an otherwise monotonous society.