

A brief introduction to american literature essay sample



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American literature, to my eyes, like American history, although short, however, still full of glories and shining masterpieces and writers. Those American writers, while conquering this wild America, also had conquered the great field of American literature. From its first imitative activities to innovative attempts nowadays, American literature gradually gains its unique style, theme and form, and I'm always excited to see their works are more and more America in its true sense. American literature is part of world's literature, however, it always has its unique flavor that cannot be easily ignored.

Most critics hold that the history of American literature can be divided into six parts, orderly, colonial period, romanticism, realism, naturalism, modernism and post-modernism.

Although American literature in its true sense did not begin until 19th century, however, we always talk about colonial period as a preparatory introduction to American literature. To follow the suit, I'd like to take the colonial period also as the first part to introduce.

Chapter 1 Colonial Period ©¥ A Utilitarian Literary period

(1) Background

This period is unique in American literature, and the literature in this period is mainly a literary expression of the Puritan idealism.

The first settlers came to America with the wish to °purify± the religious practice in the church, because they left Britain for the reason that they were religiously and politically persecuted. Therefore, they were called

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°Puritans±. Puritans soon established their own religious and moral principles, which has influenced the American thought and American literature a lot.

(2) Characteristics

To express their puritanical thoughts, many types of writing were used, such as letters, autobiographies, sermons, diaries and poems. Therefore, it's safe to conclude that the literature at this period is utilitarian. It should teach some kind of lesson, and therefore, the content of the writing had been predetermined by a practical consideration.

In terms of its style, puritans placed much stress on plainness and directness in writing because they were unusually interested in influencing the simple-minded people. Writers wrote without unnecessary ornament and references that the common people would not understand.

In terms of its content, they relied on the Bible. Not only did they argue by quoting the Bible, but also they saw their whole situation in Biblical terms, and therefore all events, however small, were created by God.

(3) Representative Writers

During this period, two prominent writers emerged. They were Jonathan Edward and Benjamin Franklin.

Edward was well known as a powerful and strong preacher. In 1734-1735, Edward was responsible for a wave of religiosity that swept Northampton. More than three hundred persons were converted. In 1740 he wrote The

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Personal Narrative, which tells a story of how a sinner learns his mistakes and converts to Christianity. He's narrative is lyrical.

Benjamin Franklin was a rare genius in America. He was an enthusiastic researcher and inventor and was truly Enlightenment thinker. His place in literature owes much to his almanac and autobiography and his Poor Richard's Almanac gives advice in commonsense witticisms and maxims.

Chapter 2 Romanticism © An Age of Idealism

1. Background

The term romantic was a designation for a school of literature opposed to the Classic. Romanticism, as a literary movement, stretches from the end of eighteenth century through the outbreak of the Civil War.

At that time, to some liberal thinkers, and to a group of writers, it was felt that the Age of Reason had run its course. Man's reason seemed separated from the world of nature, of beauty and of emotion for a long time. Then, the romantic writers used their understanding of nature in order to understand human consciousness, as well as imaginative power, which allowed them to enter into some kind of relationship with the natural world. Rationalism had made them hunger for the primitive, the magical and even the gloomy. Therefore, in a rationalistic society, some writers indulged in the irrational and romantic for protest, for aesthetic thrill, still others for spiritual fulfillment.

2. Development

Romanticism developed from its early stage to its high stage with changes both in style and theme.

Early romanticism was more or less imitative of British literature of Romanticism. They were experimental and conformist. At that time, the new United States of America was in a period of development, growth, experimentation and search. Above all, it was a time of extension of the American nation and the American identity. During this period, some American writers did begin to attract notice abroad and their books drew attention of important foreign figures. Although English literary models were still admired, the American writers soon turned to the American civilization and found their materials in the culture and history of their native land.

American Romanticism reached its peak with some literary giants in Romantics Poe, Whitman, Dickinson, Hawthorn and Melville. They created for themselves a new personality. High Romantists lived in a period of vast commercial expansion when Americans had more opportunities, more freedom and believed that United States was the greatest nation on earth. However, romantic writers, otherwise, tended to depict the darkness of the country, and therefore, their works endure deeper power.

3. Characteristics

The characteristic of romanticism can be summed up into four words: emotion, intuition, imagination and individualism.

(1) For romantic writers, the emotions were more important than reason and common sense. Romantics held that one could find truth through one's

feelings. They believed that the irrational was important in human experience and that not everything could be explained by reason. This is just opposite to the rational theories that Benjamin Franklin followed.

(2) Romanticism was a movement against being too objective, thus it held that one could trust one's subjective responses. It stressed on the formation of intuitive perceptions.

(3) Romanticism paid much attention to the creative function of imagination. Many romantic writers wrote with wonderful imagination, which brought the reader a fresh new world they had never seen before. And this distinction gave romanticism its unique flavor.

(4) Individualism is against authority. They emphasized personal freedom and the role of the individual at the very center of the life and art. They cherished no hero-worship, yet believed in the perfectibility of humanity. They believed in the goodness of human beings.

4. Representative writers

In early romantic period, representative writers were Washington Irving and William Bryant.

Washington Irving was considered as the forefather of the American literature, who turned American literature from pure imitation to independent creation. His international popular book was the Sketch Book, of which two stories are outstanding, °Rip Van Winkle±, and °Legend of Sleepy Hollow.

William Bryant is often regarded as one of America's earliest nationalist poets, who was called "the American Wordsworth." He was respected by American people because he provided at that time the national consciousness.

In high romantics, those people such as Edgar Ellen Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson and Herman Melville can never be neglected. Poe established a new symbolic poetry, formulated the new short story in the detective line and laid the foundation for analytical criticism; Hawthorne was essentially a moralist, using the new England regional past as subject and showed great concern about the American past; Whitman was considered as forefather of American free verse; Dickinson was a lyric writer as well as private writer; while Melville filled his book with symbolic richness and penetration.

Chapter 3 Mirror-like Realism

1. General introduction

In a word, realism describes real characters, real scenes and real incidents.

Civil war served as a double-blade knife: on the one hand, it solved the problem of industrialization by abolishing slavery, while on the other hand, it also brought about many problems. After the civil war, the writers of these decades realized that they were writing in a society that was undergoing tremendous changes. The general themes of American literature during these years concerned the effect of money getting upon American literature and civilization.

Realists often thought of their art as a mirror, convinced that if they reflected the surface of life, they would also reflect it truthfully.

2. Characteristics

(1) Realism writers placed their emphasis on ordinary people, settings and events. They were interested in the commonness of the character rather than treated them as symbols. They believed that common people would reflect the average of life truthfully, therefore, they didn't avoid to write about man's cruelty, greed and stupidity.

(2) They preferred probing explorations of character rather than the merely plot. Realistic writers didn't emphasis plot. Characters lived through ordinary experiences of childhood, adolescence, love, marriage, parenthood and death, during which the psychological state of them was the most important.

(3) The style of realistic writing is plain. The scenes of the everyday life were presented in a straightforward way. Writers held that only the plain style could truly reflect the ordinary life faithfully, and this kind of style was their conscious practice of their realistic theory.

(4) Realism emphasized objectivity. In this case, the third person omniscience was always used to promote a note of reality. The author just presented the reader what the characters did, and it was up to the reader to decide what it meant.

3. Differences between Realism and Romanticism

- a. As the name suggests, romantic writers always held a optimistic view towards life and indicated it in their writing, while realistic writers were always pessimistic.
- b. Romanticism believed in spirit, individualism and imagination, however, in contrast, realism believed in experience, the lust for money and reality.
- c. Romantic writers were egalitarianists who believed that life was equal for everyone, but realistic writers, by contrast, could see through all these superficialness and express the fact of inequality.

4. Representative writers

American realism is prominent in the history of the world literature, and this can be contributed to several fantastic American realistic writers, among whom William Howells, Mark Twain and Henry James were the most famous.

Howells most important novels are A modern instance, A Womans Reason, The Rise of Silas Lapham, etc. The themes of his novel were always the social issues. He always predetermined the character of his novel as a ;°self-made businessman;±, and employed a kind of plain and natural style in his writing.

Mark Twain was also interested in social issues; however, he expressed the same issue from a very different angle and in a very different style. The characters in his novel were always the uneducated children and this is also true in his masterpiece The Adventures of Huckbery Finn. Mark Twain was famous for his humorous style and his humor always turned out to be satire.

The style of his language is dialectal and colloquial, bearing the local color.
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Henry James was quite good at the international theme, which was fully presented in his novel *The Portrait of a Lady*. Therefore, in terms of the theme, he was different from the two writers above. The characters in his novel were educated heroes and heroines from the upper class, opposing to Howells common people. In terms of style, James was obscure and costive, not easy to be understood.

Chapter 4 Naturalism An Age of Heredity and Environment

1. Origin

Naturalism is a theory in literature emphasizing the role of heredity and environment on human life and character development roughly between 1890s and 1900s.

Darwins 1895 publication of *The Origin of the Species* had impact many new ideas into peoples mind: the struggle for existence, survival of the fittest and natural selection. Then Darwinism was adopted to the social area the stupid and the weak would fall victim in the natural course of events to economic forces. Writers began to write about the society growing and developing in the same way as animal class.

Emile Zola, a famous and influential French writer, first proposed the principles for nationalistic writing. He argued that the purpose of a novelist was to be a scientist, to place his characters in a situation and then to watch the influence of heredity and environment destroy them. Therefore, heredity and environment had an influence over human ability to survive.

Therefore, under the French influence, a literary movement called Naturalism took place in America.

2. Characteristics

(1) Humans are controlled by laws of heredity and environment. Humans are getting around down like little ants. They have no choice. Therefore, naturalistic fiction has no evidence of effective choice, or free will.

(2) Naturalistic literature tends to be concerned with the less elegant aspects of life. Its typical settings are the slum, the factory or the farm. This tendency is in part a reaction against earlier literature.

(3) Naturalistic style is flat, objective and bare of imagery. Writers ignored what considered literary beauty and tended to abandon the literary traditions.

3. A Comparison with Realism

Many people consider realism and naturalism as the same thing. However, I still like to chisel them off for the existing difference between them, although they have similarities.

Similarities:

a. They both opposed to the idealism, which was proposed by romanticism, and tended to describe to world realistically.

b. They both depicted the life of ordinary people from the middle or lower class, as opposed to the romanticism, which described its characters to be heroes.

Differences

a. Realism was mainly about average people, and tended to take them as a whole, while naturalism held that extraordinary is real, too. Therefore, they would like to focus on the life of poverty and crime.

b. Realistic writers are like a mirror, reflecting all life without selection, however, naturalistic writers is like a camera with a lens which could focus on whatever interested them.

c. Realism would like to give moral lessons and evaluate the rational quality of the character, while naturalistic writers who did not care the moral character, only probing their accidental, psychological nature.

4. Representative Writers

Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, and Theodore Dreiser are three well-known naturalistic writers.

Crane's attitude was always pessimistic. His *Maggie* is the first naturalistic fiction in America, which describes a girl's suicide as a result of hypocritical morality of her mother and her lover; Norris also represented the contradictions and paradoxes of America at the turn of the centuries. He was optimistic, and always used a simple style; Theodore Dreiser was famous for

his *Sister Carrie* (1900), which was a perfect manifest of naturalistic theory. Therefore, he was called the chief spokesman for the realistic novel.

Chapter 5 Modernism An Age of Alienation

1. General Introduction

Modernism is a literary movement from the early to the middle 20th century. It represented a self-conscious break with traditional forms and subject matter and a search for a distinctly contemporary mode of expression.

Modernism was the consequences of the transformation of society brought about by industrialism and technology in the course of the 19th century. It included a wide range of artistic expressions such as symbolism, impressionism, post-impressionism, futurism, constructivism, imagism, expressionism, dada and surrealism.

2. Characteristics

(1) Modernistic writers always had a strong feeling of alienation, of loss and of despair. They were critical of received beliefs, usually from a position of disillusionment of World War I. Life for them was diminished. They alienated from nature, from society, from others, even from themselves.

(2) They tended to be subjective to express their own thoughts, although it is discontinuous and fragment. They had a sense that what people had written before was not good enough, because it expressed ideas that they could no longer accept. Therefore, they believed in nothing, only themselves.

(3) In terms of its style, they were quite experimental. They challenged traditional literature with the technique of symbolism, stream of consciousness and the use of myth, in order to make a strong and conscious break with traditional forms.

3. Imagism

(1) General Introduction

Imagism first began with an English philosopher, and writer Thomas Ernest Hulme, who called on poets to express their momentary impressions through the use of one dominant image. And in America, it developed with the publication of great number of magazines. Imagists used the image to express their ideas, which were not easy to be understood.

(2) Characteristics

Imagists had a set of principles as to treatment, diction and rhyme. They tended to use common speech and well-chosen words; avoid all clichés; use new rhyme; make free choice of subject; present an image in the poetry; strive for concentration and suggest rather than offer.

(3) Representative Writers

Ezra Pound was a man with a brain whirling with ideas and he was the prime leader of the imagist movement. His poems are fresh and as a poet, through theory and practice, he had charted out the course of modern poetry. And his representative works are *High Selwyn Mauberley* and *the Cantos*.

T. S. Eliot is famous for his *The Waste Land*, which is filled with obscure and is really difficult to understand. His point of view is quite pessimistic, and tended to persuade the reader to see and feel the fragmentary nature of life. However, he still did not completely deny the possibility of reordering of life.

4. Lost Generation

(1) General Introduction

The period of Lost Generation was also called the the Jazz Age. Under the impact of the first World War and the impact of the economic boom, Americans lost their sense of being a part of American society. Writers alienation from America often took the form of exile and expatriation, and Paris became the extra-parliamentary center of America culture in 1920s. however, although they lived in Europe, criticizing America, they had not given up on American civilization.

(2) Representative Writers

Ernest Hemingway was undoubtedly the most important one. Reading him, we experience the immediacy and directness of a person wounded by a bullet and still trying to talk before he dies. For him, mans greatest achievement is to show grace under pressure;± and also, he explore this courage in many forms. His language style is simple, yet powerful, which consist with his Iceberg theory. His sentences give small bit of information, and the other is implied. Both in his works and his personal life, Hemingway was considered as a myth.

Francis Fitzgerald was the spokesman of a crucial period in the culture history of America. His greatness lies in the fact that he found the embodiment of the experience of the nation and created a myth out of American life. The story of *The Great Gatsby* is good illustration. His style is smooth, sensitive and completely original in its diction and metaphors.

Chapter 6 Postmodernism An Age of Solipsism and Nihilism

(1) General Introduction

The emergence of postmodernism in America was related to the Second World War and the postindustrial social structure there afterwards. It is considered peculiarly American, because a multiplicity of independent voices made their Appearance there, although postmodernism is not a united movement with a coherent theory.

However, they do share the common concept. Postmodernists think that the world is full of randomness, disorder, irrational and can't be expressed.

Therefore, the only way to write is to describe the world likewise. Its natural for us to find out disorder, deliberate chaos, fragmentation, violation, disruption, dislocation, concentration and indetermination in their works.

Moreover, they tend to use black humor, which express the anger and bitterness by means of comedy, showing the characters vain attempt to create order in their absurd world, and Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* offers an excellent example of it.

The themes of postmodernism are solipsism and nihilism, so that writers do not trust their own ability to give shape or significance to the absurd world.
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Therefore, they tend to play the language freely over the discursive coherence, because they stress the form rather than the content of American reality.

(2) Differences from Modernism

Postmodernism is different from modernism in several aspects. Modernism created a sense of underlying coherence and order, while postmodernism could find out no possibility of the existing of such order; whereas modernists manipulated ancient myth and stable symbols, postmodern fiction confronted contemporary myth and clichés; postmodernists long for a both/and;± situation, that is to say, they appropriate genres, both high and popular, rather than a either/or; by those of modernists.

Conclusion

American literature, in which the sensibility interweaves with the sense and rational, is always on its growth. If the colonial period was an age of utilitarianism and romanticism was an age of idealism, then realism was an age of real depiction, naturalism an age of admiring heredity and environment, modernism an age of alienation and postmodernism an age of solipsism and nihilism. From the traits of its development, we see that a period featuring in sensibility was always followed by a period featuring in sense and reason. During its development, American literature gradually gains its unique flavor, which is different from other nations in the world. A great number of extraordinary American writers with themselves attached to the local American culture appear, and American literature draws the

attention of the world undoubtedly. Therefore, American literature is the precious treasure of the world literature and can never be ignored.