

In general, as Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffith and Helen Tiffin note: English literature is substituted by 'english' literatures in the present. In other words, as their very title indicates, the empire writes back.

AMERICAN LITERATURE

It is difficult to classify the periods of American literature, in the way one does with the British literature. However, a categorization based on the dominant historical, cultural, political and literary events, American literature can be made as follows. (This division of American literature is based on M. H. Abrams' *A Glossary of Literary Terms*.)

The **Colonial Period (1607-1775)** refers to the period from the founding of the first settlement at Jamestown to the outbreak of the American Revolution. It was a period of mostly religious literature and Cotton Mather and Jonathan Edwards were the most notable authors. William Bradford and John Winthrop wrote some historical accounts concerning the founding of early settlements. Edward Taylor and Anne Bradstreet laid the foundation of the rich poetic tradition in American literature. Recent researches have traced the origin of African-American poetry to Phillis Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects* (1773).

The **Revolutionary Age** is the name applied to the period from 1765 and 1790. This was the time of resistance in the colony and later the granting of freedom. Thomas Jefferson's political essays and Thomas Paine's revolutionary tracts constituted the key writings of the era. Most of the political writings were patriotic.

The period from 1775-1828 is known as the **Early National Period**. Imaginative Literature began to be written during this period. It includes the first American comedy (Royall Tyler's *The Contrast*, 1787), novels by William Hill Brown, James Fenimore Cooper and Charles Brockden Brown, poems by William Cullen Bryant and Edgar Allan Poe. *The North American Review* began its publication in 1815 and became the first enduring American Magazine.

The period that followed was the **Romantic** era in American literature, popularly known as **Transcendentalism**. The period takes its name the American Renaissance from F. O. Matthiessen's *The American Renaissance* (1941). The worship of nature and move into the wilderness began with Emerson and Thoreau. Equally important were their contributions to the development of American prose through philosophical writings such as Emerson's 'Self-Reliance' (1841), and Thoreau's *Walden* (1854). In fiction, Herman Melville's

Moby Dick (1851) and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) achieved cult status. William Wells Brown's *Clotel* (1853) and Harriet E. Wilson's *Our Nig* (1859) are important in the present as novels written by the African Americans. Walt Whitman, Edgar Allan Poe and H. W. Longfellow were the main poets of the period. Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) and Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) were examples of a renewed interest in the autobiographical slave narratives, though they were written in the eighteenth century. Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was a literary masterpiece for the straight forward articulation of the persecution experienced by the African-Americans.

What followed was the **Realistic** period in literature, referring to the literature that emerged after the Civil War, the Emancipation proclamation, and reconstruction. The social characteristics of the period were the rise of individualism, industrialism and urbanization which in turn made a sense of Americanism. The main novelists during this phase were Mark Twain, William Dean Howells, Henry James, Harold Frederic, Mary Wilkins Freeman and Kate Chopin. Through novels like *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885) Mark Twain initiated not only a witty, sarcastic realism, but also a kind of regionalism by setting his novels on the Mississippi River region. Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) became a feminist classic, in its critic of religion and conservatism. Whitman continued to be the most influential poet of this period, in spite of the fact that Emily Dickinson wrote most of her poems at this time (though only seven of them got published in her life time). Charles W. Chesnut and Paul Laurence Dunbar were the representatives of African Americans in fiction and poetry respectively.

The **Naturalistic** period (1900-1914) denotes the literature of the twentieth century up to the commencement of World War I. The three novelists - Frank Norris, Jack London, and Theodore Dreiser - were known as the naturalists in American fiction for creating characters who are joint victims of their instinctual drives and of external sociological forces and presenting their subjects with scientific objectivity and elaborate documentation. For instance, the 1903 novel *The Call of the Wild* by Jack London was a story of the 'gold rush' with a dog named Buck as the central character. The novel demonstrated how the dog shed the veneer of civilization in an extremely competitive world and led a primordial instinctual life.

The **Modernist** period (1914-1939) of American literature is historically the era between the two world wars. It was during this phase that American authors achieved widespread international

recognition and influence. The triggering point of this new wave was the founding of *Poetry* magazine in Chicago by Harriet Monroe, in 1912. The distinguished poets of the era include Edgar Lee Masters, Edwin Arlington Robinson, Robert Frost, Carl Sandburg, Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, Robinson Jeffers, Marianne Moore, T. S. Eliot, and e. e. Cummings. (Eliot is presently considered as a British poet, though American by birth.) The dominant poetic modes such as Imagism, Symbolism and Naturalism emerged during this phase. Frost wrote metric poems while Williams experimented with free verse poems in American English. Wallace Stevens wrote abstract, symbolist and philosophical verses. Ezra Pound's innovative Imagistic poems, for instance *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, were typically modernist for technical experimentation, clarity, precision and economy of language. The major American novelists of the period were Edith Wharton, Sinclair Lewis, Ellen Glasgow, Willa Cather, Gertrude Stein, Sherwood Anderson, John Dos Passos, F. Scott Fitzgerald, William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, Thomas Wolfe and John Steinbeck. Stein was well-known for inaugurating the break with linear and temporal narrative conventions of nineteenth century realism. The 1949 Nobel Laureate William Faulkner, whose fictions set in the imaginary Yoknapatawpha County of Mississippi, was famous for *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), *Light in August* (1932), *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), all of which employed the stream of consciousness narrative technique, coupled with rich symbolism and Christian allegory. Ernest Hemingway, through novels like *The Sun also Rises* (1926), *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940) and *Old Man and the Sea* (1952), blended the spirit of the 'Lost Generation', and Existentialism and with an extremely economical narrative style. F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and *Tales of the Jazz Age* displayed the glamour and meaninglessness of the flamboyant and pleasure-seeking 1920s. Drama in America flourished in the later twentieth century, drawing inspiration from the Eugene O'Neill's expressionist tragedies such as *The Emperor Jones*, *Long Day's Journey into Night* and *The Hairy Ape*. In the history of African-American literature, the 1920s was the decade of the Harlem Renaissance which produced major works in all the literary forms by Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Jean Toomer and Zora Neale Hurston. The economic depression of the 1929 produced what is known as the 'radical '30s' – a phase in which most of the modernist writers took radical stances in politics and literature.

The **Postwar** period of American literature denotes the literature from 1939 to the 1970s. The World War II, the Cold War and the failure of Communism as a political project in Russia were

the events that shaped the literature of these decades. The failure of radical political ideologies urged a return to conservatism and the New Criticism of the 1940s was an example. The Fugitives in poetry, the Southern Agrarians, stressed the autonomous nature of the text apart from its historical conditions, and thus proposed an apolitical critical school.

In literature, the 1950s witnessed the emergence of vigorous anti-establishment and anti-traditional literary movements. The Beat writers (of the '50s), Allen Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs, Neil Casady and Jack Kerouac, stood for the rejection of standard narrative values, a commitment to sexual liberation, experimentation with drugs and a spiritual quest stressing the exploration of American and Eastern religions. The Black Mountain Poets - Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, Paul Blackburn and Robert Duncan - experimented with 'Projective Verse', which is an improvised, open-form approach to poetic composition, driven by natural patterns of breath and utterance. The classical/modernist tradition was revived as the opposite of Beats by the New York Poets Frank O'Hara, Kenneth Koch, and John Ashbery in the 1960s. The confessional poetry of Sylvia Plath and Robert Lowell brought the personal to the political and historical. In fiction too, this was a period of extreme sexual candour as exemplified by the novels of Henry Miller, Norman Mailer and William Burroughs. The counter-culture, the most prominent example of which was the Hippie Movement - a progressive, anti-war movement that stood for gender equality, sexual liberation and African-American's rights - flourished in the late 1960s. In drama, it was the time when Arthur Miller presented the critique of 'the Great American Dream' in *Death of a Salesman*; Tennessee Williams depicted the broken but colourful lives of those on the fringes of ante-bellum and post-bellum society in *A Street Car Named Desire* and Edward Albee demonstrated the absurdity of human existence in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*.

) During this period, the Black Arts Movement (BAM) came up as a controversial new wave in African-American literature and culture. With their own publishing houses, magazines, journals and institutions, the group of writers - Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), Nikki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez, Rosa Guy, Maya Angelou and Hoyt W. Fuller - challenged the politics of assimilation, rejected the history of American literature itself and wrote extremely experimental vernacular literatures. Playwrights like Lorraine Hansberry, August Wilson and Joseph Walker and novelists like Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, Ishmael Reed and Alice Walker were other prominent black American writers, though they did not belong to BAM.

One of the most significant developments in American literature of this phase is the Native American Renaissance, which began in the 1960s and flourished in the 1970s. It was a project to revive the literary and cultural traditions of the native tribes; ignored, marginalized, and excluded, since the arrival of the Europeans. The major novelists were M. Scott Momaday (*House Made of Dawn*), James Welch (*Winter in the Blood*) and Leslie Marmon Silko (*Ceremony*). The poems of Diane Glancy, Mary Tallmountain and Esther Belin reflected the communitarianism, spiritual beliefs and alternate mythology of the Native American people against the materialism of the USA.

The **Postmodern period** denotes literature from the 1970s to the present. It is a period in which writers continued the experimentation in fiction and poetry, which began during modernist period. Literature, during this era, is characterized by metafiction, fragmentation, faction, pastiche, intertextuality, selfreflexivity, minimalism, maximalism, recontextualization and so on. The important novelists of the period include Joseph Heller, Thomas Pynchon, John Barth, Donald Barthelme and Kathy Acker. The verses of Jayne Cortez, Stephen Rodefer, William Corbett, Lorenzo Thomas, David Shapiro, Eileen Myles and David Trinidad expressed the various themes and forms of the postmodern in poetry. In theatre, Sam Shepard, David Mamet, Tony Kushner and Wendy Wasserstein attempted to fragment the realistic, with newly conceived stages and anti-theatrical plots.

In short, it seems safe to state that the contemporary American literature has become more multi-dimensional, multi-ethnic and polyphonic and will continue to be so.