

# AMERICAN LITERATURE THROUGHOUT ITS HISTORY

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## ABSTRACT

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**T**he aim of this paper is to give a brief history of American literature, going through the four centuries (in chronological order) of the US' existence, and the books which defined them. The criteria upon the selection of the books that will be analyzed in this paper varies, with it being either because of their historical or literary importance. We will be starting the presentation with what is considered as the first ever American novel, *The Power of Sympathy* written in the 18th century, before moving forward with other books which are considered literary masterpieces, and eventually finishing up with *Infinite Jest* which will highlight how American literature has changed (and maybe evolved) during this time.

**Keywords:** American literature, eras, books, novel, masterpieces.

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## Introduction

The American literature, in general, has fascinated me because of the number of masterpieces it contains despite its relatively young age. It might come down to my personal preference, but when preparing this paper, I had to spend half an hour choosing which books I should include in it, and the literature of a country that is only 300 years old has no right to do that, and yet the American one does. I would also like to mention another fact which I have found remarkable while reading up on this subject, it seems as if, whenever the USA was confronted with a tense political situation, all of the great writers (and artistic figures in general) pulled through and created masterpieces about that specific topic, to help the people, their countrymen, get through those difficult periods in time. This was especially the case during the Great Depression, which just happens to be my favorite literary period. In this paper, I have not focused on plots and characters, as I believe that the listeners will already be familiar with most of the works that I will be discussing about. Without further ado, I would like to start this paper, with the start of American literature itself.

### **American Literature in the 18th Century**

Seeing as the United States of America was only formed in 1776, it should come as no surprise that literature wasn't the primary concern in 18th century US. However, as mentioned in the abstract of this paper, the 18th century gave us (what is widely regarded as) the first ever novella in US literature, *The Power of Sympathy*.

Based on what I have read upon this book, I do not think that an in-depth analysis of *The Power of Sympathy* is needed, as I believe there is little literary value to the book, however, for being a pioneer, and for its great historical significance, I felt that it deserved a mention on this paper.

The book describes day to day life in the 18th century colonial US.

### **American Literature in the 19th Century**

After the American Revolution, and increasingly after the War of 1812, American writers were exhorted to produce a literature that was truly native. As if in response, four authors of very respectable stature appeared. William Cullen Bryant, Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, and Edgar Allan Poe initiated a great half century of literary development. The works which I will be analyzing for this time period in American Literature will be:

*The Raven* by Edgar Allan Poe, *Moby Dick* by Herman Melville, and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain.

#### ***The Raven***

Now throughout my research upon American literature, I have found that American writers all put some American ideals and beliefs in their works, be it blatantly or subconsciously. That is not the case with Edgar Allan Poe. His dark persona and manner of writing is highlighted in his masterpiece of a poem, *The Raven*. *The Raven* has reached an almost legendary status, literary-wise, and it remains as the only famous example of trochaic octameter in English verse.

*The Raven* tells the story of a man who is trying to forget his lost love Leonore one night, when he hears a knock on the door, when he opens it, he sees nothing but a raven, he is tempted to talk to the bird, and when he does, the raven keeps saying "Nevermore".

Now there is nothing really American about this poem, but it is undoubtedly a masterpiece and a prime example of Gothic poetry with its dark setting, morbid topic of grieving, and, well, ravens...

### ***Moby Dick***

Moby Dick, named after the giant whale which Captain Ahab is obsessed with, is a novel written by Herman Melville, which was published on the 18th of October 1851. Initially, Moby-Dick was disliked by the critics and it was an epic flop of a novel, in part because it is one of the most gruesome novels written in American, but over time, this book has turned into a classic, and a large part of that is due to its genius way of using symbolism, metaphors and allegories.

The best description of Moby Dick is the one from book reviewer Scott Berkun, when he said: *"I diligently read every page, resisting the urge to skim and skip, exploring if I could resist the temptations of my attention. And in so doing I learned how much wider the idea of a novel is than I'd thought it could be. He successfully (at least in terms of posthumous readership, the book didn't sell that well in his lifetime) manages to twist the concept of a novel into various odd shapes, with strange and unwieldy corners – it made me rethink the notion of what a book, fiction or non-fiction, can be like. As a writer I'm glad I read the whole thing."*<sup>1</sup>

### ***Adventures of Huckleberry Finn***

Written by the father of American literature, Mark Twain, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is the second book in the Tom Sawyer series by the author. Although it is a piece of literary genius, and an undoubtable masterpiece, some of the content in this novel hasn't aged particularly well, especially when considering the politically correct society of modern times. I'm talking of course, about the casual racism that exists throughout the book, portrayed by the then acceptable use of the demeaning term "nigger" to address black people. This fact becomes an even sadder representation of the time of this book's publishing when you take into consideration that Mark Twain was anti-racism and anti-slavery, and yet, even he, a liberal by 19th century standards, felt comfortable with using such derogatory terms. Nevertheless, I think that we should not let the vocabulary used in the book hamper our judgment when valuing this book for what it is, a revolutionary masterpiece.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://scottberkun.com/2010/book-review-moby-dick/>

## **American Literature in the 20th Century**

There is a good argument to be made that the US nation became the global power that it is today during the 20th century. Its overcoming of the Great Depression, major involvement and being the decisive factors in two world wars, and the Cold War that followed them shaped the USA and its literature into one of the world's best. I believe that the 3 books and the short poem that I've chosen to talk about in this section of my paper highlight those major world events and their impact on the US. I'll begin with a poem written by soldier John McRae during World War I<sup>2</sup>, before going on to talk about *The Great Gatsby* which was written by F Scott Fitzgerald, before discussing *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee and ending this section of the paper with *Infinite Jest*, by David Wallace.

### ***In Flanders Fields* by John McRae**

*In Flanders fields the poppies blow  
Between the crosses, row on row,  
That mark our place; and in the sky  
The larks, still bravely singing, fly  
Scarce heard amid the guns below.*

*We are the Dead. Short days ago  
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,  
Loved and were loved, and now we lie  
In Flanders fields.*

*Take up our quarrel with the foe:  
To you from failing hands we throw  
The torch; be yours to hold it high.  
If ye break faith with us who die  
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow  
In Flanders fields.*

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<sup>2</sup> Technically, I'm cheating here, seeing as John McRae was a Canadian soldier, but his experiences during World War I were those of every soldier, including American ones.

***The American novel***  
***The Great Gatsby***

This absolute masterpiece by (in my opinion) the best American writer of all time, and maybe one of the greatest literary minds in world history has interwoven all the American ideas, values and beliefs into an amazing story of ambition, desire, love, social issues, and perhaps most of all, the core idea of the American state, the American Dream. F.S. Fitzgerald brilliantly depicts the American Dream, and its demise, in the *Great Gatsby*. By using literary devices and symbols, the writer is able to convey the phases a person went through while following the dream that the US once promised to anyone who graced its soil. Even though every time the American Dream is mentioned, the first thing people seem to think about is money, in my opinion the dream stands for much more than that, it stands for happiness, and I think that the unfortunate fact that most people associate money with happiness has led to the idea that in order to live in the American Dream, you have to gain wealth, that certainly wasn't the case for Jay Gatsby, who merely used money and mansions and cars and extravagant parties in order to achieve his American Dream, which lay on the other side of the Sound, brilliantly symbolized by that green light, the dream for Gatsby was to be with the one he had loved and lost. This book is more than just that, and its analysis would require an entire paper of its own, so I'll leave it at this.

***To Kill a Mockingbird***

Another brilliant book by another brilliant author, Harper Lee. This novel amazingly depicts the social issues and struggles of minorities (especially African-Americans) in 20th century USA, a struggle that is also closely linked with the American Dream. During the 20th century (because of the aforementioned world unrest) the American Dream was shaken for the first time of its existence, and this lead Americans, and especially their artists and writers to hold on to it for dear life, therefore we see its ideas in many American creations during this timeframe.

The most apparent case of racism in the novel is the case of Tom Robinson, a black man who is accused of raping a white girl named Mayella Ewell. Atticus Finch decides to defend Tom in court, and despite standing up for people of color being frowned upon at that time, especially in the south, Atticus Finch didn't let the case go, even after his children were bullied because their father was standing up for a "Negro", he kept on fighting for the rights of what he believed to be an innocent man, he kept on fighting for equality, most importantly, he kept on fighting for the future, he was fighting so that his children would be able to live in a better society, so that Tom Robinson's children would be able to get the same opportunities as his children, he kept fighting for the American dream, and in the end even though Atticus Finch does a

great job of defending him in court and despite the overwhelming evidence of his innocence, Tom is convicted solely based on his skin color. Later, as he tries to escape from his prison, he is shot down and killed by the prison guards. The death of Tom Robinson leaves Atticus with great doubt about the legal system of his country, and rightly so. Tom is one of those mockingbirds after whom the novel is named, as Harper Lee brilliantly puts it: "Mockingbirds don't do one thing but make music for us to enjoy. They don't eat up people's gardens, don't nest in corncribs, they don't do one thing but sing their hearts out for us. That's why it's a sin to kill a mockingbird."

### ***Infinite Jest***

Infinite Jest is a instrumental piece of writing by David Foster Wallace which was published in 1996. I am of the opinion that this will likely be the last groundbreaking and society defining novel in American history, I am in no way saying that the American writers have lost their ability to produce masterpieces, but in the current day and age, with the rise of the internet and commercialism, books (along with all of art) seem to have sold their soul. Since I have never managed to get past the first chapter of the book (it is a famously difficult read) I will leave the reviewing to Emma Lee Moss, a writer for UK newspaper The Guardian:

*"At more than 1,000 pages – with copious footnotes – Infinite Jest is a famously difficult read. It is the Gen-X Ulysses that even those like me, who consider themselves DFW super fans, are nervous to attempt, many preferring to feed their devotion with his essays and short stories. Set in a North America of what was, in 1996, the near future, the novel follows a breathtaking number of characters. They are all somehow tied to the destiny of the Incandenza family and its youngest son, Hal, a tennis prodigy who, before the novel begins, finds his father's body after a microwave-based suicide.*

*The book, which launches the reader into its semi-dystopian world without really explaining its conditions or origins, requires monumental focus to even loosely follow, as it leaps between perspectives and locations, laughing in the face of stylistic continuity. Practically daring your eyes not to cross, Wallace deals language like a mad, drunk croupier, mixing the book's hyper-detailed narratives with film script dialogue, lists, stream-of-consciousness, archived correspondence, and large portions of pure information whose closest relatives are found in product manuals and data reports.*

## **Conclusion**

For the reasons mentioned in the beginning of the Infinite Jest analysis and review, I will not be mentioning any 21st century pieces of literature in this paper. To conclude, the American literature has been a mirror of the American society and nation through the ages. Starting with its undervalued works of Mark Twain and Herman Melville in the 19th century, and continuing up with the works of world renowned author as Harper Lee and Fitzgerald, literature in the US (just as in any other place in the world) serves as a mirror for the country from which it came from. I am of the belief that, especially in the 20th century, books and pieces of literature were what kept the US public going through all of its tremendous difficulties. Be it by providing optimism or giving a self-reflection of society, or through the shady means of propaganda (as is the case with English author George Orwell's Nineteen Eighty Four and Animal Farm), the US was able to hold on to global power at times when most nations would've faced perishing off of the face of the Earth. We as non-Americans haven't felt the fruits of these geniuses as much as the American people have, but still, sitting here and being able to read these masterpieces, putting yourself in the shoes of the people that were going through those struggles, and having the opportunity to critique and analyze some of the greatest minds in human history has truly been a blessing for me.