

# American Literature

An Introduction



# Lit. Periods

- Early American Lit. 1607-1820
- American Romanticism 1820-1865
- American Realism & Naturalism 1865-1914
- Modern American Lit. 1914-1945
- Contemporary American Literature 1945 - present



# Early American Literature



An Era of Change



# Early American Literature

- **Time Period:** 1607-1820
- **Historical Context:**
- First "American" colonies were established
- Religion dominated life and was a common theme in writing
- American character/patriotism grew and led to the American Revolution

# Early American Literature

- **Genre/Style (Literature of Settlement-1600-1750):**
- sermons, diaries, personal narratives
- most writing sought to express the connections between God and their everyday lives
- very plain writing style
- **Genre/Style (Literature of Revolution-1750-1800):**
- political pamphlets, essays, travel writing, speeches
- highly ornate writing style





# American Romanticism

An Era of Optimism



# American Romanticism

- **Time Period:** 1820-1865
- **Historical context:**
- Expansion of book publishing, magazines, newspapers
- Valued feeling, intuition, idealism
- Viewed society as "artificial" and valued unspoiled nature
- Saw poetry as the highest expression of the imagination

# American Romanticism

- **Genre/Style:**
- Short stories, novels, poetry
- imagination over reason; intuition over fact
- writing can be interpreted 2 ways: surface and in depth
- focus on inner feelings
- "dark romantics" used dark and supernatural themes/settings (gothic style)



# American Realism & Naturalism



An Era of New Beginnings



# Realism & Naturalism

- **Time Period:** 1865-1914
- **Historical Context:**
- Civil War brings a demand for a "truer" type of literature that doesn't idealize people
- People in society are defined by class; materialism
- Common subjects include slums of rapidly growing cities, factories replacing farmlands, poor factory workers, corrupt politicians
- Literature represented everyday life and ordinary people



# Realism & Naturalism

- **Genre/Style:**
- Realism - focused on ordinary people; anti-materialism
- Naturalism - a darker view of the world; our lives are shaped by forces we can't understand or control
- Common Themes: survival, fate, nature as an indifference force, violence





# Modern American Lit.

An Era of Pessimism



# Modern American Lit.

- **Time Period:** 1915-1945
- **Historical Context:**
- World War I; The Great Depression; WW2
- Loss of faith in "The American Dream"



# Modern American Lit.

- **Genre/Style:**
- Bold experimentation in style and form
- Interest in the inner workings of the human mind
- Writers tried to create a unique style



# Contemporary American Lit.

An Era of Diversity





# Contemporary American Lit.

- **Time Period:** 1945-present
- **Historical Context:**
- Post WW2 prosperity; The Cold War; the fall of civil religion



# Contemporary American Lit.

- **Genre/Style:**
- Multiculturalism = Rise of minority voices
- Literary minimalism (similar to Hemingway's style)  
= reader must construct meaning
- Postmodernism = no universal truth
- Blurred line between fiction and nonfiction