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A Concise History of American Literature
What is literature? Literature is language artistically used to achieve identifiable literary qualities and to convey meaningful messages.
Chapter 1 Colonial Period
I. Background:
Puritanism
1. features of Puritanism
(1) Predestination: God decided everything before things occurred.
(2) Original sin: Human beings were born to be evil, and this original sin can be passed down from generation to generation.
(3) Total depravity
(4) Limited atonement: Only the “elect” can be saved.
2. Influence
(1) A group of good qualities hard work, thrift, piety, sobriety (serious and thoughtful) influenced American literature.
(2) It led to the everlasting myth. All literature is based on a myth garden of Eden.
(3) Symbolism: the American puritan’s metaphorical mode of perception was chiefly instrumental in calling into being a literary symbolism which is distinctly American.
(4) With regard to their writing, the style is fresh, simple and direct. the rhetoric is plain and honest, not without a touch of nobility often traceable to the direct influence of the Bible.
II. Overview of the literature
1. types of writing diaries, histories, journals, letters, travel books, autobiographies/biographies, sermons
2. writers of colonial period
(1) Anne Bradstreet
(2) Edward Taylor
(3) Roger Williams
(4) John Woolman
(5) Thomas Paine
(6) Philip Freneau
III. Jonathan Edwards
1. life
2. works
(1) The Freedom of the Will
(2) The Great Doctrine of Original Sin Defended
(3) The Nature of True

Virtue3. ideas pioneer of transcendentalism(1) The spirit of revivalism(2) Regeneration of man(3) God ' s presence(4) Puritan idealismIV. Benjamin Franklin1. life2. works(1) Poor Richard ' s Almanac(2) Autobiography3. contribution(1) He helped found the Pennsylvania Hospital and the American Philosophical Society.(2) He was called " the new Prometheus who had stolen fire (electricity in this case) from heaven " .(3) Everything seems to meet in this one man " Jack of all trades " . Herman Melville thus described him " master of each and mastered by none " .Chapter 2 American RomanticismSection 1 Early Romantic PeriodWhat is Romanticism?#61548. A literary trend: 18c in Britain (1798~1832)#61548. equality of things and beings#61548. immanence of God#61548. evolution of cosmos#61548. self-reliant spirit#61548. expansion of America#61548. pursuit of love and happiness4. style: " free verse " (1) no fixed rhyme or scheme(2) parallelism, a rhythm of thought(3) phonetic recurrence(4) the habit of using snapshots(5) the use of a certain pronoun " I " (6) a looser and more open-ended syntactic structure(7) use of conventional image(8) strong tendency to use oral English(9) vocabulary powerful, colourful, rarely used words of foreign origins, some even wrong(10) sentences catalogue technique: long list of names, long poem lines5. influence(1) His best work has become part of the common property of Western culture.(2) He took over Whitman ' s vision of the poet-prophet and poet-teacher and recast it in a more sophisticated and Europeanized mood.(3) He has been compared to a mountain in American literary history.(4)

Contemporary American poetry, whatever school or form, bears witness to his great influence.

II. Emily Dickinson

1. life
2. works
 - (1) My Life Closed Twice before Its Close
 - (2) Because I Can ' t Stop for Death
 - (3) I Heard a Fly Buzz When I died
 - (4) Mine by the Right of the White Election
 - (5) Wild Nights Wild Nights

3. themes: based on her own experiences/joys/sorrows

- (1) religion doubt and belief about religious subjects
- (2) death and immortality
- (3) love suffering and frustration caused by love
- (4) physical aspect of desire
- (5) nature kind and cruel
- (6) free will and human responsibility

4. style

- (1) poems without titles
- (2) severe economy of expression
- (3) directness, brevity
- (4) musical device to create cadence (rhythm)
- (5) capital letters emphasis
- (6) short poems, mainly two stanzas
- (7) rhetoric techniques: personification make some of abstract ideas vivid

III. Comparison: Whitman vs. Dickinson

1. Similarities:
 - (1) Thematically, they both extolled, in their different ways, an emergent America, its expansion, its individualism and its Americanness, their poetry being part of “ American Renaissance ” .
 - (2) Technically, they both added to the literary independence of the new nation by breaking free of the convention of the iambic pentameter and exhibiting a freedom in form unknown before: they were pioneers in American poetry.
2. differences:
 - (1) Whitman seems to keep his eye on society at large. Dickinson explores the inner life of the individual.
 - (2) Whereas Whitman is “ national ” in his outlook, Dickinson is “ regional ” .
 - (3) Dickinson has the “ catalogue technique ” (direct, simple style) which Whitman doesn ' t have.

Edgar Allen Poe. Life

II. Works

1. short stories
 - (1) ratiocinative

storiesa. Ms Found in a Bottleb. The Murders in the Rue Morguec. The Purloined Letter(2) Revenge, death and rebirtha. The Fall of the House of Usherb. Ligeiac. The Masque of the Red Death(3) Literary theorya. The Philosophy of Compositionb. The Poetic Principlec. Review of Hawthorne ' s Twice-told TalesIII. Themes1. death predominant theme in Poe ' s writing “ Poe is not interested in anything alive. Everything in Poe ' s writings is dead. ” 2. disintegration (separation) of life3. horror4. negative thoughts of scienceIV. Aesthetic ideas1. The short stories should be of brevity, totality, single effect, compression and finality.2. The poems should be short, and the aim should be beauty, the tone melancholy. Poems should not be of moralizing. He calls for pure poetry and stresses rhythm.V. Style traditional, but not easy to readVI. Reputation: “ the jingle man ” (Emerson)VII. His influencesChapter 3 The Age of RealismI. Background: From Romanticism to Realism1. the three conflicts that reached breaking point in this period(1) industrialism vs. agrarian(2) culturely-measured east vs. newly-developed west(3) plantation gentility vs. commercial gentility2. 1880 ' s urbanization: from free competition to monopoly capitalism3. the closing of American frontierII. Characteristics1. truthful description of life2. typical character under typical circumstance3. objective rather than idealized, close observation and investigation of life “ Realistic writers are like scientists. ” 4. open-ending:Life is complex and cannot be fully understood. It leaves much room for readers to think by themselves.5. concerned with social and psychological problems, revealing the frustrations of characters in an environment of

sordidness and depravity

III. Three Giants in Realistic Period

1. William Dean Howells “ Dean of American Realism ”

(1) Realistic principles

- a. Realism is “ fidelity to experience and probability of motive ”
- b. The aim is “ talk of some ordinary traits of American life ”
- c. Man in his natural and unaffected dullness was the object of Howells ’ s fictional representation.
- d. Realism is by no means mere photographic pictures of externals but includes a central concern with “ motives ” and psychological conflicts.
- e. He condemns novels of sentimentality and morbid self-sacrifice, and avoids such themes as illicit love.
- f. Authors should minimize plot and the artificial ordering of the sense of something “ desultory, unfinished, imperfect ”
- g. Characters should have solidity of specification and be real.
- h. Interpreting sympathetically the “ common feelings of commonplace people ” was best suited as a technique to express the spirit of America.
- i. He urged writers to winnow tradition and write in keeping with current humanitarian ideals.
- j. Truth is the highest beauty, but it includes the view that morality penetrates all things.
- k. With regard to literary criticism, Howells felt that the literary critic should not try to impose arbitrary or subjective evaluations on books but should follow the detached scientist in accurate description, interpretation, and classification.

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