• **Introduction**

American literature is universally recognized as a distinctive national literature. The influences from the old world have been modified and given new directions by the attitudes and values that developed in the new. Among the distinctive qualities of American literature are candor, wry humour, sharp observation, an ear for the colloquial and an eye for the commonplace.

The earliest American writings are principally journals, religious tracts, and histories. The English colonists who settled the new world came to make their fortunes or to establish ways of life and worship denied them at home. When they wrote, it was for practical purposes. They wished to dramatize their achievements to justify their actions and principles and to provide guides for future settlers. Most early colonial writing comes from new English. The general absence of large towns in the southern colonies, which meant the absence of printing presses, libraries, schools or even a community of interested readers, delayed the growth of literature.

American thought and writing during the 17th century was shaped by the rationalized prevailing in Europe. The 18th century has been characterized the Age of Enlightenment. Men began to think of themselves as being liberated from the errors, superstitions, and dead traditions of the past. The Enlightenment exalted the principle of reason. Through the use of reason man could understand the working of the universe and improve his lot on earth without divine assistance. It was an optimistic philosophy, convinced of the natural goodness and perfectibility of man, certain of the progress of history, and intolerant of authority, whether of the state or of revealed religion. The religious philosophy known as design relegated good to the status of vague first cause who created the universe and thereafter left it to
run itself according to those scientific laws which Newton had recently discovered.

The conclusion of the war of 1812 freed the United States from the danger of foreign domination and inspired a national optimism and confidence. American could turn its attention to internal expansion, and the frontier way of life continued greatly to the national spirit of individuality and freedom. The Romanticism then prevalent in Europe admirably suited the temperament of 19th century America, with its great emphasis on individuality and emotion.

It was New England that American Romanticism became a matured system of thought and feeling. The wealth from the seas and sound banking had helped to create a leisure and security in the Boston area which made the cultivation of letters possible. Many of New England Romantics were drawn to Transcendentalism. This philosophical movement was based on a belief in the innate divinity of every man and a faith in man's capability to understand immortality, the soul, and God through intuition, which transcends pure reason. Transcendentalism was a reaction against the Enlightenment's emphasis on reason alone. This rebellion had been initiated by the Deists and Unitarians, but the movement received its major philosophical and literary inspiration from a variety of sources, including Plato, the Hindu seers, French Idealists, and German philosopher Kant.

One of the earliest Romantics in America was E.A. Poe (1809-1849), master of the macabre short story. Author of a handful of immortal lyrics whose dominate theme is the unearthly beauty of a lost love and a literary critic of considerable note. He was the first American writer to believe in "Art for art's sake." Melody and novelty working together fix Poe's verses easily in the mind with the result that "Lenore," "The Raven," and "Annabel Lee" are among the best known American compositions.
The acknowledged spokesman for the new England Romantics was the philosopher, essayist poet R.W. Emerson (1803-1882). He was the most inspiring lyceum lecturer of his days, drawing on the entries in his Journals for material. The first among the “heirs” of Emerson was the local naturalist and iconoclast Thoreau (1817-1862). He adhered to the transcendental values of self-reliance independence and non-conformity as a way of life. Thoreau’s most influential essay is “Civil Disobedience” (1849), which advocates a policy of pacific resistance to war and slavery. Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864), shared the puritan obsession with the sense of sin. In his finest work, “The Scarlet Letter” (1850), he shows his fascination with the effect that the concealment of sin has upon the soul. The novel is a study of the effects of sin on its three protagonists. Hester redeems herself by the courage with which she accepts her public shame, and the faith she keeps with her lover in hiding his secret. Dimmesdale is destroyed by the organized struggle with his conscience. Chillingworth in his attempt to carry out a vengeance that belongs to God alone changes from man to devil. Symbolism is dexterously employed throughout the novel.

The Civil War divided the nation into two armed camps and seriously affected the economic structure of both the North and the South. In the decades following the war, the defected South spiritually and economically depleted. In the North the shipping magnets had lost their lead in maritime commerce during the war. Sidney Lanier (1842-1881), the poet, novelist and musician was the American representative of the English aesthetic movement known as pre-Raphaelitism. His “Poems” (1884) echo the Pre-Raphaelitism lite hostility to industry and trade. In the war novel “Tiger Lilies” (1867) some of the first realistic descriptions of southern life are found.

The bulk of Whitman’s poetry appears in his “Leaves of Grass” (1855) marks the beginning of a new era in American Literature. Only to Whitman as a poet in his days and almost his exact
opposite, is Emily Dickinson (1830-1886). She wrote 2000 lyrics while only five were published in her lifetime. Emerson was her immediate master. Mark Twain, William Dean Howells and Henry James are labelled as American humours.

In the last decades of the 19th Century, America turned away from its Post-Civil War provincialism and once more became influenced by European thoughts and literature. Henry George, Torstein Veblen, William James and Henry Adams were the thinkers who appeared between 1875 to 1900 to resolve the dilemma of modern man. In the second decade of the twentieth century, America experienced a literary revolution in which 19th century deals, forms and habits were discarded. O’Neill brought creative drama to the American stage in 1916. The poets of the early 20th century rebelled against traditional poetic techniques, purposes and themes. The centre of the revolution was Chicago, where Harriet Monroe had founded


The 20th century has often been termed “The age of criticism.” In ‘America’s Coming of Age’ (1915), Van Wyck Brooks called for a critical movement capable of dealing with the problems of literary life in America at the present time. The ideas expressed in T.S. Eliot’s ‘The Sacred Wood’ (1920), started the analysis and close study of texts that led to the works of R.P. Blackmur, Cleanth Brooks, Kenneth Burke and others known as the New Critics.

Most of the novelists who first published in the 1920’s were born in the last decade of the 19th century. They grew up in the years when the nation was confident, powerful and reaching maturity as a world power. But after the World War I, these writers were ready to consider themselves “a lost generation,” in the words of Gertrude Stein. The world they had known was thrown into turmoil.
and confusion. The future was uncertain. Sherwood Anderson, Fitzgerald, Dos Passos, Thomas Wolfe, Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner were the dominant figures of "Lost generation".