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**American Literature up to the Civil War**

These notes survey the evolution of American literature from the colonial beginnings to the Civil War (1861–65), with particular focus on the growth of a distinctive national literature. The period moves from religious and political writing to the rich imaginative achievement usually called the **American Renaissance**. The attached reference text is especially useful in relating literary developments to territorial expansion, industrialization, slavery, Native American displacement, reform movements, and the widening print culture of antebellum America.

**1. History of American Literature**

American literature is the body of oral, written, imaginative, religious, political, and cultural expression produced in the geographical and social spaces that later became the United States of America. It is not limited to the writings of white English-speaking settlers, nor can it be treated as the expression of one uniform national culture. From its beginnings, American literature has emerged from the interaction, conflict, and exchange among Indigenous peoples, European colonists, enslaved Africans and their descendants, women, immigrants, religious dissenters, reformers, and many regional communities. It includes Native American oral narratives, colonial sermons and histories, Puritan poetry, Revolutionary pamphlets, slave narratives, sentimental novels, Gothic romances, philosophical essays, journalism, speeches, and poetry. Therefore, American literature is best understood as a diverse and evolving tradition shaped by settlement, colonization, revolution, democracy, slavery, expansion, migration, industrialization, cultural conflict, and the search for national identity.

Before the Civil War, American writers repeatedly confronted a number of fundamental questions. They asked what it meant to be American after political independence from Britain. They questioned whether the New World could create a literature independent of European models and traditions. They explored the conflict between individual liberty and communal responsibility, especially in a democratic society. They also addressed the grave contradictions between the ideals of freedom and equality and the actual conditions of slavery, racial

inequality, Native American dispossession, and women's limited social position. The development of American literature before 1865 is therefore inseparable from the nation's political, moral, and social struggles. The attached text presents American writing as a continuing attempt to make the "unknown" of personal and national identity intelligible through literature.

## 1.2 Major phases before the Civil War

| Period                                            | Approximate dates                                      | Dominant features                                                                                     |
|---------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Native American oral traditions</b>            | Before European colonization and continuing thereafter | Myths, songs, origin stories, rituals, communal memory                                                |
| <b>Colonial period</b>                            | 1607–1776                                              | Puritan theology, sermons, journals, histories, captivity narratives, religious poetry                |
| <b>Revolutionary and Early National period</b>    | 1765–1800                                              | Political pamphlets, speeches, republican ideals, satire, early novels                                |
| <b>Early nineteenth century</b>                   | 1800–1830                                              | Search for national identity; romance, frontier literature, the beginning of the American short story |
| <b>American Romanticism and Transcendentalism</b> | 1830–1860                                              | Individualism, nature, imagination, self-reliance, reform, symbolism                                  |
| <b>American Renaissance</b>                       | c. 1830–1860                                           | Major achievements in fiction, poetry, essays, and philosophical prose                                |
| <b>Literature of reform and sectional crisis</b>  | 1830–1865                                              | Abolitionist writing, slave narratives, women's writing, anti-slavery fiction, Civil War tensions     |

## 1.3 Native American oral traditions

American literature did not begin with the arrival of English colonists. Before European settlement, Native American peoples possessed complex, diverse, and highly developed oral literary traditions. Since North America was inhabited by many distinct tribes and nations, speaking different languages and following different cultural practices, there is no single Native American literary tradition. Each community developed its own stories, songs, ceremonies, myths, legends, and forms of cultural memory. These oral traditions formed the earliest foundation of American literature.

Native American oral literature included creation myths, origin stories, trickster tales, ceremonial chants, songs, hero narratives, animal stories, and legends connected with sacred landscapes. Creation myths explained the origin of the world, human beings, animals, landforms, and spiritual powers. Origin stories described the beginnings of a tribe, clan, ritual, or custom. Trickster tales featured figures such as Coyote, Raven, Rabbit, or Spider, depending upon the particular culture. These figures could be comic, foolish, clever, selfish, creative, or wise. Such stories entertained listeners but also taught ethical lessons, exposed human weakness, and questioned conventional authority.

Songs and ceremonial chants were often performed during rituals of healing, harvest, mourning, warfare, celebration, initiation, and communal worship. Their meaning was connected not only with words but also with performance, rhythm, repetition, music, movement, and ceremonial setting. Native American stories often represented animals, rivers, forests, mountains, and the earth as spiritually meaningful. Nature was not treated merely as scenery or property; it was understood as a living and sacred presence connected with human life, ancestry, and communal responsibility.

These oral traditions preserved tribal history, ethical values, spiritual beliefs, language, and collective identity. They educated younger generations and maintained a people's relationship with land, ancestors, and community. The importance of Native American oral literature lies in its challenge to the narrow belief that American literature begins with European printed texts. It reminds us that America possessed literary, cultural, and spiritual traditions long before English colonization.

## **1.4 Colonial literature**

Colonial literature developed in the territories that later became the United States during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Much of this writing was practical, religious, historical, or political rather than imaginative in the modern sense. It included letters, journals, travel accounts, sermons, histories, autobiographies, devotional poetry, captivity narratives, political documents, and personal testimonies. Colonial writers were concerned with settlement, survival, faith, conflict, trade, family life, and the establishment of communities in an unfamiliar environment.

The most influential early body of colonial literature came from the **Puritans** of New England. The Puritans were English Protestants who wished to reform or

“purify” the Church of England. Many of them migrated to New England during the seventeenth century in the hope of creating a godly community governed by biblical principles. Their writing was intensely religious, moral, and didactic. They believed that God actively directed human affairs and that historical events, illness, success, disaster, war, and personal suffering could all be interpreted as signs of divine providence.

Puritan thought was based on the idea of covenant. Puritans believed that they had entered into a special agreement with God. If they obeyed divine law, they would prosper spiritually; if they failed, the entire community could suffer. For this reason, individual conduct was not merely private. Every person had responsibility toward the moral and religious health of the community. Puritan literature therefore often deals with sin, grace, salvation, temptation, spiritual struggle, self-examination, and divine judgment. Its language is frequently biblical, its tone serious, and its purpose moral.

**William Bradford’s *Of Plymouth Plantation*** is one of the most important works of early American prose. Bradford, a leading figure of Plymouth Colony, records the Pilgrims’ voyage, early settlement, hardships, relations with Native Americans, internal disagreements, and struggle for survival. The work is not simply a historical account; it is a providential narrative. Bradford interprets the experiences of the Pilgrims as evidence of God’s guidance and testing. The wilderness appears as a place of danger and uncertainty, but also as a space in which faith, discipline, and communal endurance are tested. *Of Plymouth Plantation* established an important American pattern: the belief that national history may carry a moral or spiritual meaning.

**John Winthrop’s sermon “A Model of Christian Charity”** is another foundational Puritan text. Delivered in 1630, it presents the Puritan community as a moral experiment before the eyes of the world. Winthrop’s famous phrase, “a city upon a hill,” suggests that the settlers must live in such a way that other nations will observe and judge them. If they remain faithful, charitable, and united, they may become an example; if they fail, they will bring shame upon themselves. Winthrop stresses mutual responsibility, Christian charity, and social interdependence. The rich have duties toward the poor, and every member of the community must recognize that private conduct has public consequences. His vision later influenced the powerful American idea of national mission or exceptionalism.

**Anne Bradstreet** occupies a special place in colonial literature as the first major English-language woman poet in America. Her collection, *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America*, was published in 1650. Bradstreet wrote within the framework of Puritan belief, but her poetry also expresses deeply personal feelings about marriage, motherhood, domestic life, grief, love, mortality, and loss. In “To My Dear and Loving Husband,” she speaks warmly and directly of marital affection. In “Upon the Burning of Our House,” she records the pain of losing her home and possessions in a fire, but finally accepts that earthly possessions are temporary and that the true home of the Christian lies in heaven. Her poetry is important because it joins Puritan religious discipline with the intimate experience of a woman, wife, mother, and poet.

**Edward Taylor** was another significant Puritan poet. A minister by profession, he wrote devotional poems that remained unpublished during his lifetime. His most important work is *Preparatory Meditations*; a series of poems connected with spiritual preparation for communion. Taylor’s poetry deals with sin, grace, redemption, and Christ’s sacrifice. He uses elaborate metaphors drawn from domestic labour, agriculture, trade, and craft. Ordinary objects and activities become symbols of spiritual truth. His work shows that Puritan writing was not merely plain or dry; it could be imaginative, intellectually subtle, emotionally intense, and highly figurative.

**Mary Rowlandson’s *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God***, also known as *A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*, is a major example of the captivity narrative. Rowlandson was captured during King Philip’s War, a conflict between English colonists and Native American groups in New England. Her narrative describes the attack on her settlement, her separation from family, her suffering, movement through the wilderness, religious reflections, and eventual release. The captivity narrative became an important early American genre because it combined adventure, danger, religious testimony, and cultural conflict. Rowlandson interprets her suffering through the doctrine of providence, seeing hardship as a spiritual test. At the same time, the text reflects Puritan fear and prejudice toward Indigenous peoples. It should therefore be read both as a personal testimony of trauma and as a document shaped by the racial and cultural conflicts of colonial expansion.

## 1.5 The Enlightenment and the Revolutionary period

During the eighteenth century, American intellectual life gradually moved beyond the predominance of Puritan religious thought. Religion remained important, but the **Enlightenment introduced new emphasis on reason, science, natural rights, political liberty, education, and human progress.** Enlightenment thinkers believed that human beings could use reason to understand society, improve institutions, resist tyranny, and create more just forms of government. These ideas became especially influential during the American Revolution.

**Revolutionary literature was deeply political. Writers used pamphlets, speeches, essays, newspaper articles, songs, satirical poems, and plays to persuade colonists to oppose British rule. Literature became an instrument of public action.** The political writer was no longer merely a commentator but a participant in the struggle for independence.

**Benjamin Franklin** is the leading representative of the American Enlightenment. He was a printer, editor, scientist, inventor, diplomat, political thinker, civic reformer, and writer. His *Autobiography* presents the ideal of self-improvement through industry, discipline, practical wisdom, education, and public usefulness. Franklin describes his effort to cultivate moral virtues such as temperance, order, frugality, industry, sincerity, justice, moderation, cleanliness, tranquillity, chastity, and humility. His prose is clear, direct, humorous, and practical. He became the model of the self-made American: a person who rises through intelligence, labour, discipline, and service to society.

**Thomas Paine** played a decisive role in Revolutionary writing. His pamphlet *Common Sense*, published in 1776, argued powerfully for American independence from Britain. Paine attacked monarchy and hereditary rule, presenting independence as a rational and necessary political choice. He wrote in simple, forceful language for ordinary readers, thereby making political argument accessible to a broad public. His series *The American Crisis*, written during the Revolutionary War, encouraged Americans to continue their struggle despite fear and hardship. Its opening line, "These are the times that try men's souls," became one of the most famous sentences in American political writing. Paine's importance lies in his ability to convert political philosophy into persuasive popular prose.

**Thomas Jefferson**, the principal drafter of the *Declaration of Independence* in 1776, gave literary and philosophical expression to the ideals of the Revolution. The Declaration argues that all human beings possess natural rights and that governments derive their authority from the consent of the governed. Its major principles are equality, liberty, natural rights, and the right of people to alter or abolish unjust government. The document is not only a political statement but also a major work of American prose because of its balanced structure, logical argument, and universal moral language. Yet its assertion that “all men are created equal” stood in painful contradiction to the continued existence of slavery. This contradiction became one of the central moral issues of American literature and history.

Philip Freneau, often called the “Poet of the American Revolution,” was a poet, journalist, and political satirist. He wrote patriotic poems, political attacks, nature poetry, pastoral verse, and poems concerned with slavery and Native Americans. In works such as “The Rising Glory of America,” written with Hugh Henry Brackenridge, he celebrated the future of the new nation. However, he also recognized that American writers remained culturally dependent on Britain. In “Literary Importation,” Freneau asks whether Americans can ever be considered cultured or learned unless their ideas are imported from Britain. His poetry thus reveals the difficult task of creating a national literature: American writers wished to separate from Britain politically, but they still often relied on British literary forms and styles. In “The Wild Honeysuckle,” Freneau turns from political rhetoric toward the quiet observation of a small American flower. The attached text interprets this poem as an early movement toward a more local, precise, and distinctively American poetic voice.

### **1.6 Early American fiction**

The American novel began to develop during the late eighteenth century. Early novelists wrote at a time when many readers, religious leaders, and moralists regarded fiction with suspicion. Novels were often considered frivolous, morally dangerous, or socially useless. As a result, early American novels frequently claimed to be based on fact and to possess a clear moral purpose. They warned readers against seduction, vice, irresponsible desire, and social disorder. Many of them were influenced by British sentimental fiction, Gothic fiction, and the epistolary form, in which the story is told through letters.

**William Hill Brown’s** *The Power of Sympathy*, published in 1789, is often regarded as the first American novel. It is an epistolary romance whose stated

purpose is to expose the dangerous consequences of seduction and to demonstrate the value of female education. The plot centres on a threatened incestuous marriage between Harrington and Harriet Fawcett, who eventually discover that they are the children of the same father. The tragic consequences of this discovery emphasize the novel's moral warning. Although the work is melodramatic, it is historically important because it establishes central concerns of early American fiction: female vulnerability, sentimental feeling, moral instruction, and the relation between private desire and social responsibility.

**Susanna Rowson's** *Charlotte Temple*, first published in Britain in 1791 and later in the United States in 1794, became one of the earliest and most popular American bestsellers. It tells the story of Charlotte, a fifteen-year-old schoolgirl who is seduced by the soldier Montraville and persuaded to leave England for New York. She is assisted in her downfall by Mlle La Rue, a woman whom she trusts. Montraville eventually abandons Charlotte, who gives birth to a daughter and dies in poverty. The novel directly addresses young female readers and presents itself as a warning against seduction. Yet its deeper power lies in its recognition that Charlotte is not fully in control of her own fate. She becomes vulnerable to male authority, social manipulation, and economic dependence. The attached text observes that the novel reveals the gap between a young woman's apparent freedom and her actual lack of power within a patriarchal society.

**Hannah Webster Foster's** *The Coquette*, published in 1797, is another important epistolary novel. The story is told through seventy-four letters, chiefly written by the heroine Eliza Wharton and her friend Lucy Freeman. Eliza is intelligent, attractive, spirited, and conscious of her own needs. She rejects the idea of marrying Reverend Boyer, a respectable clergyman whom she considers dull and restrictive. She becomes involved with Peter Sanford, a charming but irresponsible man who eventually marries an heiress. Eliza later becomes pregnant, leaves home, and dies in childbirth. At one level, the novel warns women against seduction and social danger. At a deeper level, it reveals Eliza's longing for freedom and her dissatisfaction with marriage as an institution that may restrict a woman's autonomy. The attached text argues that *The Coquette* asks whether an individual can remain free within society or survive outside it.

**Hugh Henry Brackenridge's** *Modern Chivalry*, published in instalments between 1792 and 1815, uses comedy and satire to examine the political culture of the new republic. The work is set in rural Pennsylvania and offers one of the first extended portrayals of backwoods life in American fiction. Its two principal

figures, Captain John Farrago and his Irish servant Teague O'Regan, recall Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. Their adventures provide Brackenridge with an opportunity to satirize ignorance, ambition, populism, and political folly. The novel reflects contemporary debates about democracy, leadership, and the dangers of unqualified people seeking public authority. It also anticipates later American traditions of frontier humour and political satire.

**Charles Brockden Brown** was the first major professional American novelist. He attempted to support himself through writing, editing, and journalism, and he believed that fiction should be intellectually serious while also remaining exciting enough to attract a broad readership. His most important novels are *Wieland*, *Arthur Mervyn*, *Ormond*, and *Edgar Huntly*. These works combine the social and moral purpose associated with William Godwin, the psychological interest of Samuel Richardson, and the sensational elements of Gothic fiction. Brown was especially important because he adapted the Gothic tradition to American settings and concerns. Instead of relying on European castles and supernatural conventions, he used the American wilderness, frontier danger, Native American conflict, urban disease, sleepwalking, religious fanaticism, and social uncertainty.

Brown's *Wieland* is particularly important for its exploration of psychological instability and unreliable narration. The novel tells of mysterious voices, religious fanaticism, murder, and uncertainty about the nature of reality. Carwin uses "biloquium," a form of ventriloquism, to project voices and deceive others. Theodore Wieland believes that God commands him to murder his family. The narrator, Clara, admits that her account may be affected by "inaccuracy and confusion," making the reader question whether the narrative can be trusted. Brown's fiction explores the instability of reason, faith, sense perception, and personal testimony. His interest in abnormal psychology and deceptive narration anticipates Edgar Allan Poe. His use of symbolism, ambiguity, and Gothic atmosphere prepares the way for Hawthorne and Melville, while his use of the wilderness as a place of danger and adventure anticipates James Fenimore Cooper.

### **1.7 Social background of antebellum literature**

The literature produced between 1800 and 1865 developed during a period of extraordinary transformation in the United States. The nation expanded geographically, its population grew rapidly, immigration increased, the economy

shifted from agriculture toward industry, railways and steamboats transformed transportation, slavery became more entrenched in the South, Native American communities were removed from their lands, reform movements gained strength, and newspapers and magazines created a mass reading public. These historical changes shaped both the content and the form of American literature.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the United States consisted of sixteen states and occupied about one-third of the American continent. By 1853, however, it had achieved continental dimensions. The Louisiana Purchase of 1803 added an enormous territory acquired from France. Florida was ceded by Spain, Oregon claims were settled with Great Britain, and large southwestern territories were taken from Mexico over several decades. This territorial expansion gave rise to literature about the frontier, the wilderness, travel, settlement, national destiny, and conflict between different cultures. At the same time, it depended upon conquest and the dispossession of Native American peoples.

The population increased dramatically during this period. In 1760, the thirteen colonies had a population of slightly more than 1.5 million. By 1820, the population of the United States exceeded 9.5 million, and by 1860 it had risen to nearly 31.5 million. This growth resulted from territorial expansion, natural population increase, and immigration. During the first decades after the Revolution, many immigrants came from the British Isles. After 1820, immigration increased greatly as better ocean transport enabled large numbers of people to travel from Europe and other parts of the world. America became increasingly multicultural, although this diversity also produced hostility and nativist movements directed against immigrants, especially Irish Catholics and Chinese communities.

The American economy also changed rapidly. The country moved away from a primarily agricultural society toward industry, commerce, and urban development. The transportation revolution was central to this process. In 1800, travel was mainly by wagon or water. The first steamboat appeared on an American waterway in 1807. The first locomotive was manufactured in the United States in 1830. By 1840, there were about 3,328 miles of railroad track, and by 1860 the country possessed no fewer than 30,000 miles of railway. Railways changed trade, travel, labour, industry, and migration. They encouraged farmers to produce crops for markets, enabled workers to move in search of employment, and stimulated industries such as mining, lumbering, and machine-

tool production. Walt Whitman called the railroad a “type of the modern,” recognizing it as a symbol of the new industrial age.

For African Americans, however, the antebellum period brought worsening conditions. The invention of the cotton gin and the increasing British demand for cotton made slavery highly profitable. Hopes that slavery might gradually disappear were weakened. The working and living conditions of enslaved people grew harsher, and laws prohibiting the teaching of reading and writing to enslaved people were more strictly enforced. Opportunities for enslaved people to learn a trade, hire out their labour, or purchase freedom diminished. The contradiction between the democratic ideals of the Revolution and the reality of slavery became impossible to ignore. African American writers, abolitionist journalists, preachers, reformers, and novelists exposed this contradiction through poetry, autobiographies, slave narratives, speeches, and anti-slavery fiction.

The year 1831 was especially important in the development of the slavery crisis. Nat Turner led a slave rebellion in Virginia; the Virginia legislature debated but rejected emancipation; and William Lloyd Garrison founded *The Liberator*, an influential abolitionist newspaper. After this point, abolitionist demands became increasingly urgent, while Southern defenders of slavery and states’ rights became more determined. Literature played a crucial role in this conflict. Slave narratives revealed the brutality of enslavement, abolitionist newspapers argued for immediate emancipation, and novels such as Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* appealed to the moral feelings of a large reading public.

Native American peoples also suffered deeply during this period of expansion. The federal policy was primarily one of removal. Under the Removal Act of 1830, tribes were compelled to surrender lands east of the Mississippi River in exchange for territory farther west. The Cherokee of Georgia and North Carolina had adopted agriculture and even created a constitution in 1827 modelled on that of the United States. Nevertheless, they were forced to move westward to Oklahoma in what became known as the Trail of Tears. At least 4,000 Cherokee people died in detention camps or during the removal itself. This historical reality complicates literary myths of the frontier, progress, and national destiny. It reveals the violence that lay beneath much of American expansion.

The antebellum period was also an age of religious revival and reform. The Second Great Awakening brought intense evangelical energy to American life. In 1790, only about one in twenty Americans was estimated to belong to a church,

but by the 1830s about three in four Americans belonged to one. Baptists and Methodists became particularly important. For many people, religion encouraged personal conversion and spiritual salvation. For others, it became the basis of reform movements aimed at improving society. Reformers worked against slavery, poverty, alcoholism, discrimination against women, and oppressive treatment of Native Americans. The belief that moral and religious values should transform social life gave new energy to abolitionism, temperance, educational reform, women's rights, and prison reform.

Women's position in society became a subject of growing debate. Some writers, such as Catharine Beecher, defended the doctrine of separate spheres, according to which men belonged to public life and women to domestic life. Beecher argued that women possessed an important moral role within the home. Other writers and reformers, including Margaret Fuller and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, rejected the idea that women should be confined to a separate domestic sphere. They argued that such separation meant inequality and that women should be allowed to enter professions and public life according to their talent and ability. Since professional opportunities were limited, writing became one of the few means by which educated women could earn an income, express themselves, and influence society.

The growth of print culture made this literary expansion possible. Antebellum America had one of the most literate populations in the world. Americans attended lectures, debates, lyceums, and public meetings, and they read newspapers, magazines, books, and pamphlets in increasing numbers. There were approximately 1,200 newspapers in the United States by 1830. Many major writers also worked as editors or journalists. William Cullen Bryant and Walt Whitman ran newspapers, while Edgar Allan Poe, Margaret Fuller, Frederick Douglass, and Nathaniel Hawthorne edited magazines or journals. The expansion of print culture enabled writers to address large audiences and allowed literature to become a major force in public life.

Print culture also opened new possibilities for marginalized voices. The *Cherokee Phoenix*, established in 1828, was the first newspaper published by an Indigenous tribe and the first to appear in both a Native language and English. *Freedom's Journal*, begun in 1827, was the first of seventeen African American-owned and African American-edited newspapers published before the Civil War. These publications gave Native Americans and African Americans important

platforms for self-representation, political argument, cultural preservation, and resistance.

Women also gained new opportunities through magazines and publishing. Sara Josepha Hale became editor of *Godey's Lady's Book*, one of the most influential magazines of the period. Women writers achieved remarkable commercial success before the Civil War. Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* became the first American novel to sell more than one million copies. Maria Cummins's *The Lamplighter*, E. D. E. N. Southworth's *The Hidden Hand*, and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* also became major bestsellers. These works demonstrate that women were not marginal to antebellum literary culture; they were central to its readership, publishing economy, moral debates, and imaginative achievements.

## **Conclusion**

American literature before the Civil War developed through a continuing dialogue between European inheritance and American experience. It began with Indigenous oral traditions and passed through colonial religious writing, Enlightenment political prose, Revolutionary rhetoric, sentimental fiction, Gothic romance, historical narrative, abolitionist writing, Transcendentalist thought, and the great imaginative works of the American Renaissance. Its writers explored religion, liberty, democracy, nature, wilderness, individualism, social responsibility, slavery, race, gender, reform, and national identity.

The literature of this period is especially important because it reveals the central contradictions of American history. The United States celebrated liberty while maintaining slavery; it praised equality while denying full rights to women and racial minorities; it imagined expansion as progress while removing Native peoples from their lands. American writers responded to these contradictions in different ways: some defended the dominant order, some ignored its injustices, and others used literature to expose, question, and resist them. The richness of American literature up to the Civil War lies in this struggle to define the nation, the self, and the meaning of freedom.