

# LECTURES ON AMERICAN LITERATURE

THIRD EDITION

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## Lectures on American Literature

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# NOTE ON THIRD EDITION

*Justin Quinn*

The first edition of this book, published in 2002, was intended to supplement our students' study of American literature. It soon became apparent that it was being used as a reference guide and introduction by other students in the Czech Republic. Although there are many textbooks that cover this material published in the US and the UK, it was clear that there was a need for a survey of this area that was inflected by the specificities of the Czech context.

This third edition aims to amplify that work, while also expanding and improving the general coverage. Readers will see significant changes in the way that the twentieth century is dealt with. Much material has been added (especially on drama, popular culture, and the contemporary period), old material has been updated, and individual chapters are less numerous and more capacious, in order to accommodate the multiple authorship of the text.

\*

The majority of the material up in 'Beginnings to 1914' was written by Martin Procházka with additions by David Robbins.

Justin Quinn wrote the material on twentieth-century poetry, Zora Neale Hurston, Willa Cather, John Updike, Jonathan Franzen, Don DeLillo, and Dirty Realism; the introductions to periods 1945–1970 (with contributions by Hana Ulmanová) and 1910–1930, and part of the section on Ralph Ellison.

Erik Roraback wrote the introduction to the period 1970–2000, the sections on Thomas Pynchon, Norman Mailer, Kurt Vonnegut, David Foster Wallace, Lydia Davis, and Gertrude Stein, part of the sections on Toni Morrison and Ralph Ellison.

Hana Ulmanová wrote the material on twentieth-century prose (with the exceptions of those passages noted here as written by other authors).

Pavla Veselá wrote the Introduction to the period 1930–1945, all the sections on Popular Culture, and the section on Marilynne Robinson.

Clare Wallace wrote the material on twentieth-century drama, and contributed to the Introduction to the period 1945–1970.



# INTRODUCTION

*Martin Procházka*

One of the key problems of American literary histories is that of the unity of writing on the territory of the United States. To establish this unity simply on territorial principles is insufficient. To confine it within the boundaries of authoritative ‘American traditions’ delineated by critics and editors of anthologies is risky. An example of such an approach is Leon Howard’s *Literature and the American Tradition*. In the conclusion of his book Howard gives a surprisingly vague definition of this tradition: ‘a sort of intangible national quality in American literature and an under-the-surface source of that power which contemporary literature—and perhaps America itself—derives from the past’ (1960: 329). It does not help much either to see American literature as a product of ‘numerous individual imaginings’ as Malcolm Bradbury and Richard Ruland do in their literary history *From Puritanism to Postmodernism* (1991: 9). To organize and explain these ‘imaginings’ one must establish mostly fictional narratives which necessarily enhance some and suppress others. For instance, Bradbury and Ruland quote Hugh Kenner who sees in American literature a conjunction of modernism in art and of the revolutionary development in modern technology (1991: 3).

A more productive approach has been pointed out by Sacvan Bercovitch in the introduction to yet unfinished *Cambridge History of American Literature*: to view American literature as a set of ‘meanings and possibilities generated by competing ideologies, shifting realities and the confrontation of cultures’ (1994: 6). In other words, we must accept that American literature is never homogeneous (in the twentieth century there are distinct traditions of Southern, Jewish, African-American, Native American, and Latino literatures), that it develops from different cultural centers (see the following chapter) and that it is affected by changes unprecedented in Europe (the existence of the ‘frontier,’ the expansion to the West, but also the issue of slavery).

Though the authors of these lectures accept that ‘American literary history is no longer the history of a certain, agreed-upon group of American masterworks’ (Bercovitch, 1994: 2), they have selected literary texts which illustrate some most important features of the literary—and, in some cases, also broader, cultural—developments on the territory of the United States from the foundation of the first English colonies to the first decade of the twentieth-first century. While the older literature is discussed by Martin Procházka and David Robbins in the form of a selective and interpretive historical survey, twentieth-century writing is viewed from different angles, according to its main genres, cultural and ethnic differences. This also determines the structure of this book: after the first part, dealing with the major literary and cultural developments before 1914, sections on twentieth-century poetry, prose, and drama, and on major developments in post-1950 fiction follow.



AMERICAN LITERATURE:  
BEGINNINGS TO 1914

*Martin Procházka and David Robbins*



# 1 HISTORICAL INFLUENCES & DISTINCTIVE FEATURES

American literature did not grow peacefully and unproblematically from English roots, although many colonists who settled along the northeastern Atlantic coast were of English origin. Their writing was shaped by many influences, especially by the encounter with the alien reality of the American continent and by religious dissent.

## **Alien Reality of the New World**

For the first settlers, this reality was Janus-faced—both an earthly paradise and a hell full of terrible creatures. They were exposed to the severity of the climate, to famine and to diseases. As intruders seizing the lands of Native Americans (Indians), they were involved in cruel fights and even wars. The extreme conditions suffered by the first colonists and the hardships endured by frontiersmen, backwoodsmen, and settlers in the Midwest and the Far West gave birth to a set of cultural values based chiefly on individualism and self-reliance. These values shaped the heroes (especially of popular literature) and themes of the search for freedom, justice, prosperity, and adventure.

Another result of the encounter with this alien reality was the emphasis on nature in early American notions of culture and society. While the natural environment represented an alternative, it was often also represented as a counterpart to European civilization, laws, customs, and traditions, and it was believed that human beings were free to pursue happiness even beyond the boundaries of the civilized world and its laws. These are the important aspects of the American myth of the frontier. As many critics agree, some early American political leaders, as well as many writers, accepted the ‘frontier [...] as the only definition of American utopia’ (Williams 1969: 68).

## **Religious Dissent**

The appearance of dissenting groups (soon called the Puritans) that either separated themselves entirely from the Church of England or strove to reform it from within was an indication of profound changes in religious consciousness as well as in the overall spiritual climate of the age. The traditional (i.e., Catholic) foundations of spiritual authority (hierarchy of prelates and fixed rituals codified for instance in the Book of Common Prayer), which the