

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 128 798

CS 202 912

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 TITLE American Literature; Study Guide and Reading List.
 Revised.
 INSTITUTION Dallas Public Library, Tex.
 PUB DATE 76
 NOTE 23p.

EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.83 HC-\$1.67 Plus Postage.
 DESCRIPTORS Adult Education; *American Literature; Drama;
 Females; *Independent Reading; *Independent Study;
 *Literary Criticism; Literary History; Negro
 Literature; Post Secondary Education; *Reading
 Materials; Study Guides

ABSTRACT

Intended for use by adult readers who wish to independently continue their education at the college level, this study guide and reading list, compiled for the Dallas public library system, provides suggestions for the study of American literature. Readings from the works of major authors from each of the following historical periods are recommended: The age of exploration and colonization (c. 1570-c. 1770: Edwards, Taylor, Winthrop, etc.); the age of Federalism (c. 1770-c. 1820: Franklin, Cooper, etc.); the age of romanticism (c. 1820-c. 1850: Melville, Poe, Emerson, etc.); the age of realism and naturalism (c. 1850-c. 1910: James, Whitman, Dreiser, etc.); and the modern age (c. 1910-c. 1950: Eliot, Hemingway, Faulkner, etc.). Also included are suggestions for the selection of drama, literature written by women or blacks, and literary criticism, as well as a list of other study guides available through the library system. (KS)

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Study Guide and Reading List

American Literature

This study guide and reading list is part of the service of the Dallas Public Library System for its Independent Study learners. It will be especially helpful to readers who want to continue their education at the college level by following a program of independent study using the services and materials of the Library. Many universities now recognize that adults learn through independent study, and they will award credit toward a college degree to those who can demonstrate their knowledge on the tests of the College-Level Examination Program (CLEP) of the College Entrance Examination Board. The reading lists in various subject areas are not meant to guarantee that the reader will pass the examinations. They serve as a starting point for readers who wish to begin studying in a certain field or as an aid to others who are looking for some reinforcement of learning that they may have acquired through other means. For other reading materials and further information about the examinations, please see a librarian.

Prepared for Dallas Public Library
Independent Study Project

by

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Reading List Revised by
Dallas Public Library Librarians
1976

INTRODUCTION

The Scope of American Literature

It may be said that the history of American Literature is longer than that of the United States itself. Even before the first permanent European settlements in North America, Englishmen and others wrote descriptions of the new continent which they were exploring. Although such accounts might be called literature about America rather than American Literature, they do serve to remind us of two important things about our national culture: first, our close links with the continent from which a majority of our forebears came to the New World; second, the fact that much of our experience can be interpreted as reaction to a new environment.

The early settlements along the eastern seaboard were planned and carried out by men of learning, piety, and shrewd business sense. These men came from the same stock that had done so much to make a "Golden Age" in the England of Elizabeth I and her Stuart successors. It is not surprising that such men felt that what they were doing and experiencing in the American wilderness was important or that the eyes of many in their old home were fixed on them. Indeed, from their vantage point across the Atlantic, Europeans have continually watched the "great experiment" which is America with a mixture of

interest, dismay, admiration, and insight. In the field of literature Europeans have often been quicker to recognize the greatness of American writers than we ourselves have been (James Fenimore Cooper and Edgar Allan Poe were outstanding examples of this in the nineteenth century, Robert Frost in the twentieth). For such observers our literature has provided a window to the West. For us, it provides a mirror in which the forces which have made us what we are are reflected. The dreams, hopes, and fears of nearly four centuries of Americans are here for the reading, and if we would understand ourselves, we cannot afford to neglect them.

The Study of American Literature

Secondary education in this country has long made our national literature a part of its curriculum in the belief that this is one important means of instilling character and good citizenship. On the other hand, colleges and universities have been slow to grant American literature a place in their courses of study. Before the First World War only one university (Wisconsin) boasted a professorship in American literature. Since that time, however, growth in this field has been steady. At the present time, American literature flourishes in most colleges and universities, attracting a fair number of students seeking electives, and becoming a major field for

others. It should be noted, however, that in most institutions American literature is regarded as a subdivision of English literature; the prospective student of American literature majors in English and satisfies all the departmental requirements which a student specializing in, say, the English Renaissance must fulfill. A few schools offer an interdisciplinary program in American Studies, where literature, history, and government are studied as a unit.

From what was just said it follows that anyone who wishes to make American literature his field of academic specialization should get as thorough a grounding as possible in English literature. He should be prepared to meet foreign language requirements (usually one language is required for the bachelor's degree, two for the master's, and two or three for the doctorate). Graduate schools differ as to which and how many languages they require. French and German are still the most widely useful, though for some American programs Spanish would be desirable as a substitute for one of these. It is wise to tailor your program with the requirements of specific schools in mind; your librarian can show you an impressive sample of catalogues from all over the United States. In addition to this general preparation, the prospective student of American literature should acquaint himself with as much American history, politics, and culture as his schedule will allow.

The preceding paragraph was intended for the future specialist, but the advice about studying college catalogues may profit those whose interest is more general as well. The past few years, changes in course offerings reflect an important series of developments which will have the long-range effect of redefining American literature itself.

No academic field can afford to remain immune to the needs and interests of the community which it exists to serve, and American literature is no exception to this rule. The authors traditionally studied are for the most part male, white, middle class, and Protestant. Therefore they do not represent the full range of American experience. Recently, members of various minorities have forced the academic world to take a second look at American literature, and scholars and teachers have found that women, blacks, Chicanos, American Indians, and others have in fact produced an impressive body of high-quality literature. As these groups find their own voice and seek their own roots, the educational patterns in this country inevitably begin to change. The demand for courses in such fields as Women's and Afro-American Studies is now much greater than many schools can meet, but the student now entering or returning to the academic life can expect to find at least some offerings in these areas.

In range and difficulty this study guide represents a full year's work in a survey course of American literature,

but at the same time, it includes suggestions for advanced and specialized work. Whatever your reasons for undertaking this independent study, you should find such a survey of the field helpful to you. As the foregoing paragraphs have indicated, American literature is a vital, growing field of study, interrelated with other branches of the humanities and involved in the great changes in consciousness which are sweeping our country today. As you become interested in specific areas of study, you will progress beyond the suggestions given here. At this point, your Librarian will help you find books not in the study guide. Still, there is a satisfaction in using the Library's facilities on your own; here again, with his knowledge of the cataloguing, reference materials, and shelving systems, the Librarian will come to your aid.

Preliminaries: The Study of Literature

American literature is first and foremost literature: that is, a kind of writing in which how something is said cannot be separated from what is said. A journalist uses a particular format for writing up news stories about a great variety of happenings, from a bank robbery to a Presidential speech on the high price of meat. This format is intended to convey important information as quickly as possible. In addition, the journalist often writes up his story in such

a way as to give the impression that he knows all the relevant facts. On the other hand, the poet chooses one form from a wide variety of available forms (sonnet, ballad, ode, etc.). He may even create a new form if he feels his subject requires one. He may simply give you "the facts" as he sees them, or he may recreate for you the process of discovery by which facts are converted into living insight. He may appeal to your reason, your emotions, or both at once; he may invite, or force, you to make judgments about life as he sees it. At all times he makes the assumption that his audience has read other, earlier authors and is capable of measuring his achievement against theirs. The student of literature, then, must bring two things to his reading of a particular work: awareness of what earlier authors have written and attention to what the unique work in front of him is trying to accomplish. The reading of literature is thus an activity; like certain sports it requires training and practice. And as in the case of those sports, the beginner must not worry too much about his performance in absolute terms but rather about his progress.

The Dallas Public Library's Independent Study Guide to English Literature (prepared by Dr. Kenneth D. Shields of S.M.U.) is an excellent text on how to read any literature for maximum pleasure and understanding. Anyone

who wishes to make the best possible use of this guide would be well advised to obtain a copy of the English Literature guide and study it closely. On page 2 of that Study Guide you will find a number of reference materials (dictionary, Oxford Companion, handbooks) which will be useful to you. In addition, the Oxford University Press publishes a Companion to American Literature (edited by James Hart of Berkeley).¹ In addition to biographies of American writers and summaries of major works, this reference source includes articles on the literature of particular cities, states, and regions; religious and ethnic groups; and cultural movements. The wealth of factual detail collected here makes it easier for you to pursue special interests.

The core of your reading program should be a good anthology. Bradley, Beatty, and Long's American Tradition in Literature (Norton)² is one of the most comprehensive and up-to-date anthologies now available. It represents a cross-section of standard authors great and near-great, and includes a number of authors who have recently come to critical notice. The introductions and notes in this anthology are straight-forward and factual. Another recent anthology, Perry Miller's Major Writers of America (Harcourt, Brace)³ is suitable for the more advanced student; it concentrates on a smaller number of writers and precedes each

¹Full bibliographic information for the numbered references will be given in the Reading List at the end of the Study Guide.

with a rather demanding critical essay in which facts are blended with interpretive comments.

A general observation seems to be in order here: knowledge grows and taste changes in literature as in other departments of culture. Other things being equal, the beginning student should busy himself with the most recent anthologies and criticism. Here the card catalogue, with its information on publication dates, is a welcome ally.

Now that you have chosen your anthology, skim through it chronologically to get an idea of the over-all pattern of the field. Do not try to take in everything on this first reading; get acquainted with the various historical periods (for your convenience, a typical way of dividing American literature into periods is given below). Pay special attention to the introductions for each section, and note which authors take up the most space. Pause to re-read any selections you have encountered before. Make a list of periods, authors, or themes which interest you. Certain writers have a historical significance beyond their own intrinsic worth; they have directly influenced scores of authors who lived and wrote after them. The following authors seem to me to deserve some attention in your preliminary reading: from the eighteenth century, Benjamin Franklin and Jonathan Edwards; from the nineteenth, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Walt Whitman; from the twentieth, Robert Frost, T. S. Eliot, and Ernest

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Hemingway. Other great writers you may want to read now or later include Henry Thoreau, Herman Melville, Mark Twain, Emily Dickinson, and Henry James (nineteenth century); Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, and William Faulkner (twentieth century).

Once you have a rough idea of the outlines of American literature, return to the beginning of your anthology. The usual plan of a survey course in American literature is historical; authors are read in chronological order from the Puritans until about the middle of our own century. Aside from what is in your anthology, you will be expected to have read at least one novel by each of the major American novelists from Cooper to Faulkner (some of these, e. g. The Scarlet Letter and Huckleberry Finn) are in the Bradley-Beatty-Long anthology mentioned above. Long works which should be read in full are marked below with an asterisk (*). If you have read them recently, or if you have more time to spend on the period in question, read some of the unmarked titles. For other authors, the anthology selections should be sufficient; if you are interested in reading more of a particular author, your librarian will help you locate other books which contain his work.

American Literature may be divided into five ages as follows: The Age of Exploration and Colonization (c. 1570-c. 1770); The Age of Federalism (c. 1770-c. 1820); The Age

of Romanticism (c. 1820-c. 1850); The Age of Naturalism and Realism (c. 1850-c. 1910); The Modern Age (c. 1910-c. 1950). As indicated, these dates are approximate; the aspects of American culture they attempt to capture overlap and shade off into one another. The main reason for dividing a survey of the field into neat bundles of years is to encourage the student to do some reading is each major period.

PERIODS OF AMERICAN LITERATURE

I. The Age of Exploration and Colonization

Here your main focus should be on the writings of the New England Puritans. Note their preoccupation with the spiritual life (the challenging poetry of Edward Taylor), but note also their love of Nature (Samuel Sewall, description of Plum Island; Jonathan Edwards, Personal Narrative), their concern with forms of government (Mayflower Compact; John Winthrop, A Model of Christian Charity), and with understanding how the Providence of God is displayed in history (John Winthrop's Journal). These are the great themes of American life; the Puritans struggled with them all.

As the period progresses, some writers remain close to the Puritan starting-point (again, Jonathan Edwards; this great author must be widely read in if he is to be seen as more than a hellfire-and-damnation preacher), while others come to speak out for the rational, pragmatic

side of the American character (Benjamin Franklin, Autobiography).

II. The Age of Federalism

As we would expect in this period, the efforts of many of America's finest minds were directed toward winning and maintaining their independence from England. Accordingly, your attention should focus primarily on political writings (the pamphlets of Ben Franklin such as "An Edict of the King of Prussia;" the Federalist Papers, especially number 10; the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution). One of the earliest descriptions of the new nation and its citizens is Crèvecoeur's Letters From an American Farmer. A major historical novel about this period (though written later) is Cooper's The Spy.

Even in this period of "activism," however, there were many who believed that America would never become a great nation until it demonstrated cultural independence by producing a literature comparable to those of Europe. Hence we have the poetry of Philip Freneau ("The Indian Burying-Ground") and Joel Barlow (a now almost forgotten epic called The Columbiad) as well as the novels of Charles B. Brown (Wieland).

III. The Age of Romanticism

Here the energies of an expanding nation find their first sustained outlet in cultural activity. Up to this time in American literature, the demand for native authors was slight. Our first literary man to make a decent living as an author was Washington Irving ("The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," "Rip Van Winkle," Knickerbocker's History of New York, The Alhambra), and James Fenimore Cooper emerges as a major novelist (*The Deerslayer, Last of the Mohicans, The Prairie) and social critic (The American Democrat). Nathaniel Hawthorne (*The Scarlet Letter, The House of the Seven Gables, "My Kinsman, Major Molyneaux," "The Celestial Railroad") represents a more single-minded devotion to the craft of fiction. Herman Melville (*Moby Dick) is the third great novelist of this period. Important poets include William Cullen Bryant, Edgar Allan Poe, and Ralph Waldo Emerson. The latter is also important as an essayist (*Nature) and leader of the Transcendentalist movement, which also included Henry David Thoreau (*Walden, "Civil Disobedience"). A further group of poets, once greatly admired but now out of fashion, includes Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, James Russell Lowell, and Oliver Wendell Holmes.

You may have noticed that many of the authors mentioned above are commonly read in high school. In fact, many of them are now thought of primarily as "juvenile" writers. In their own time, however, they wrote, as a rule, for adult audiences. It might be interesting to check various (smaller) libraries to see where such authors as Cooper, Hawthorne, and Longfellow are shelved. If you are interested in reading a provocative argument as to why so many of our greatest writers have received this treatment, look into the "Introduction" to Leslie Fiedler's Love and Death in the American Novel.⁴

IV. The Age of Realism and Naturalism

The Age of Realism and Naturalism begins and ends with crisis: sectional conflict and world war. In between, the growing pains of industrial development force millions of Americans into new patterns of life. The literature of the age reflects these concerns as author after author struggles to present life as it is actually lived by those around him. Out of their struggle they create a greater diversity of style than any previous age has known; some of these authors are difficult reading. Our first two poets of major rank (Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson) fall into this category, as does Henry James (*The American or

*Portrait of a Lady, The Turn of The Screw, Washington Square). Other writers, especially Mark Twain, remain close to the popular roots of American life (*Huckleberry Finn, Life on the Mississippi). Other important novelists include W. D. Howells (The Rise of Silas Lapham, A Hazard of New Fortunes), Stephen Crane (The Red Badge of Courage, "The Open Boat," "The Blue Hotel"), and Theodore Dreiser (Sister Carrie). Three writers of serious non-fiction are essential to a balanced view of the period: William James (Henry's brother, the author of Essays in Pragmatism and "The Moral Equivalent of War"), Thorsten Veblen (The Theory of the Leisure Class) and Henry Adams (The Education of Henry Adams).

V. The Modern Age

It is next to impossible to sum up this period in a few easy generalizations. American literature is now as complex as the American experience itself. In every part of the world, American authors are read and studied with serious attention. Indeed, the experiments in writing which characterize "modern" work often have American roots. Below is a list of some major authors in this period:

1. Fiction: F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, John Dos Passos, John Steinbeck, William Faulkner. Your

survey should include Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby, Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises, and Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury or *As I Lay Dying.

2. Poetry: E. Arlington Robinson, Robert Frost, Ezra Loomis Pound, T. S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore, William Carlos Williams, and Hart Crane.

In more recent times, new stars have risen above the literary horizon. While not usually covered in survey courses, these authors are important as continuers of the past and heralds of the future: John Berryman and Robert Lowell in poetry; Saul Bellow, Norman Mailer, and John Barth in fiction.

You will notice that up to this point nothing has been said about American Drama. In fact, though Americans have been writing and producing plays since the middle of the eighteenth century, the history of our literature has no "golden age" of drama like the one which England enjoyed at the time of Shakespeare. Such prolific playwrights as Eugene O'Neill (*The Iceman Cometh, Long Day's Journey into Night), Tennessee Williams (The Glass Menagerie, A Streetcar Named Desire), Arthur Miller (Death of a Salesman) and Edward Albee (Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf) are usually ignored in survey courses, despite the distinction of much of their work.

The role of women is also indicated rather sketchily in this study guide. As was suggested above, the reason for this is not that women have been inactive in their field of writing (far from it!), but merely that the standard curriculum has tended to ignore their contribution. Such authors as Anne Bradstreet (17th century); Margaret Fuller, Sarah Orne Jewett, (both 19th century); Edith Wharton, Kate Chopin, Gertrude Stein, Willa Cather, Adrienne Rich, and Denise Levertov (all 20th century) will repay anyone seeking to know what this contribution has been.

Even more glaring is the study guide's silence about black writers, despite the fact that every century of American literature has produced notable works by blacks. This subject, like the question of women writers, really deserves an independent study guide of its own. You will want to look at the study guide on Afro-American History prepared by Carole Buchanan of S.M.U. which has a full range of Black Literature. For those who are interested, I shall mention only Phyllis Wheatley (18th century, poetry); Frederick Douglass (19th century, autobiography, and political writings); W. E. B. Dubois (20th century, all forms of literature and social criticism); Langston Hughes (20th century, poetry); Jean Toomer (20th century, poetry and fiction); Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and

James Baldwin (contemporary, fiction); Gwendolyn Brooks (1949 Pulitzer Prize for poetry). One useful anthology of black writing is R. Barksdale's Black Writers of America.⁵

In conclusion, I should like to offer a suggestion about the reading of criticism. Most survey courses place little or no stress on secondary sources (that is, books about books). On the other hand, most students entering a field of study are understandably somewhat hesitant about making up their own minds and are eager to rely on the opinions of others (especially when these opinions are in print!). Do not feel obliged to hunt up piles of books and articles about the authors you are reading. From time to time, though, it is helpful to see a particular author, work, or topic through someone else's eyes. When this situation arises, there are four sorts of secondary material which may be of use to you: (1) books on how to read literature (e.g. the handbooks mentioned in the study guide on English Literature); (2) commentaries on individual works and authors (e.g. G. Williamson's Reader's Guide to T.S. Eliot,⁶ which is one book in a series; other American authors treated in the series may be tracked down by consulting the card catalogue); (3) interpretations of a single author or literary movement (F. O. Matthiessen's monumental study of the 1850's, American Renaissance,⁷

is a classic in its own right); and finally, (4) statements by practicing writers on their craft (these statements take the form of prefaces, letters, and essays). The beginning student should concentrate on the second and fourth of these. Look for reliable information about the content of difficult writers like T. S. Eliot; read what such masters as Whitman, James, Poe, and Eliot thought of as their aims and goals in the writing of poetry and fiction. You may find it interesting to trace the history of poetic theory or the theory of fiction. For this purpose, the most comprehensive anthology is E. Wilson's Shock of Recognition,⁸ much too big a book to read through, much too important to ignore. Interpretive criticism (like the works of Fiedler and Matthiessen mentioned above) is interesting in its own right, but requires developed skill and judgment in its readers.

For a general view of American prose and poetry, the following are useful (again, read mainly the sections which deal with authors you are studying):

1. Henry Nash Smith, Virgin Land. A study of the frontier and its impact on American writers from Cooper to the dime-novel Western.⁹
2. Cleanth Brooks, R. W. B. Lewis and Robert Penn Warren, American Literature: the Makers and the Making. An anthology, a history, and a critical work.¹⁰

3. Roy Harvey Pearce, The Continuity of American Poetry. A massive study which attempts to classify American poets in terms of their theory and practice.¹¹
4. David Herbert Lawrence, Studies in Classic American Literature. An exciting--often annoying--"outsider's" look at the subject. Despite its somewhat hysterical style, this book has had an enormous influence on later scholarship.¹²
5. George Snell, The Shapers of American Fiction, 1798-1947.

Your readings in American literature can be made even more meaningful if supplemented with recordings and films from the Dallas Public Library. Mark Twain is an author whose timely humor can be heard on recordings, and "Mark Twain's America" is a film available from the Dallas Public Library Film Library. Chet Huntley narrates a film on Ernest Hemingway, with an analysis of some of his works, and there are many others also. As you study, watch for television programs and live plays in the community remembering to make use of varying types of resources to create an enjoyable learning experience.

READING LIST

1. Hart, James, ed. The Oxford Companion to American Literature. Oxford University Press, 1965.
2. Bradley, Sculley, Richmond Croom Beatty, and E. Hudson Long, eds. The American Tradition in Literature. Norton, 1967.
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4. Fiedler, Leslie. Love and Death in the American Novel. Stein and Day, 1966.
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6. Williamson, G. Reader's Guide to T. S. Eliot. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966.
7. Matthieson, F. O. American Renaissance. Oxford University Press, 1968.
8. Wilson, E. Shock of Recognition. Farrar, 1955.
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12. Lawrence, David Herbert. Studies in Classic American Literature. Viking, 1964.
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