Dr.Raman Kumar Rajesh

Department of English

Cmjcollege Donwarihat Khutauna Madhubani.

BA (English)

3rd Part

American literature is written or produced in the United States of America and its preceding colonies (for specific discussions of poetry and theater, see Poetry of the United States and Theater in the United States). Before the founding of the United States, the British colonies on the eastern coast of the present-day United States were heavily influenced by English literature. The American literary tradition thus began as part of the broader tradition of English literature.The revolutionary period is notable for the political writings of Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Hamilton, and Thomas Paine among several others. Thomas Jefferson's United States Declaration ofIndependence solidified his status as a key American writer. It was in the late 18th and early 19th centuries that the nation's first novels were published. An early example is William Hill Brown's The Power of Sympathy published in 1791. Brown's novel depicts a tragic love story between siblings who fall in love without knowing they are related.

With an increasing desire to produce uniquely American literature and culture, a number of key new literary figures emerged, most prominently Washington Irving and Edgar Allan Poe. While leading the Transcendental Club in 1836, Ralph Waldo Emerson pioneered the influential movement known as Transcendentalism. Inspired by that movement, Henry David Thoreau wrote Walden, which celebrates individualism and nature and urges resistance to the dictates of organized society and Unitarianism. The political conflict surrounding abolitionism inspired the writings of William Lloyd Garrison and Harriet Beecher Stowe in her famous novel Uncle Tom's Cabin. These efforts were supported by the continuation of the slave narratives such as Frederick Douglass's Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, written in 1845.In the mid-nineteenth century, Nathaniel Hawthorne published his magnum opus The Scarlet Letter, a novel about adultery, isolation, and other important themes. Hawthorne influenced Herman Melville, who is notable for the books Moby-Dick and Billy Budd. Some of America's greatest poets of the nineteenth century include Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson. Edgar Allan Poe contributed to American literature by introducing darker themes and ideas, that would greatly influence later authors. Mark Twain (the pen name used by Samuel Langhorne Clemens) was the first major American writer to be born away from the East Coast. Henry James put American literature on the international map with novels like The Portrait of a Lady. At the turn of the twentieth century a strong naturalist movement emerged that comprised writers such as Edith Wharton, Stephen Crane, Theodore Dreiser, and Jack London.

                   American writers expressed both disillusionment and nostalgia following World War I. The short stories and novels of F. Scott Fitzgerald captured the mood of the 1920s, and John Dos Passos wrote about the war. Ernest Hemingway became famous with The Sun Also Rises and A Farewell to Arms; in 1954, he won the Nobel Prize in Literature. William Faulkner became one of the greatest American writers with novels like The Sound and the Fury. American poetry reached a peak after World War I with such writers as Wallace Stevens, T. S. Eliot, Robert Frost, Ezra Pound, and E. E. Cummings. American drama attained international status at the time with the works of Eugene O'Neill, who won four Pulitzer Prizes and the Nobel Prize. In the mid-twentieth century, American drama was dominated by the work of playwrights Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller, as well as by the maturation of the American musical.

Depression era writers included John Steinbeck, notable for his novel The Grapes of Wrath. Henry Miller assumed a distinct place in American Literature in the 1930s when his semi-autobiographical novels were banned from the US. From the end of World War II until the early 1970s many popular works in modern American literature were produced, like Harper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird. America's involvement in World War II influenced works such as Norman Mailer's The Naked and the Dead (1948), Joseph Heller's Catch-22 (1961) and Kurt Vonnegut Jr.'s Slaughterhouse-Five (1969). The main literary movement since the 1970s has been postmodernism and since the late twentieth century ethnic and minority literature has sharply increased.

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