



ABOUT THE SITE

This website is a FREE educational resource under the legal doctrine of FAIR USE. At present the future of classic American literature is uncertain. Many scholarly books in the field are going out of print and journal articles are not easily accessible to the public. In the culture war of the late 20th century literature lost, political correctness won. AmerLit.com is addressed to the general public in an attempt to conserve the American literary heritage and to encourage reading of the classics.

Reading the best literature does not necessarily make us better people in a moral sense, but it has the potential to make us wiser. The masterpieces of literature in all cultures are sacred texts: they are scripture transcending the limitations of their imperfect creators, who model ideals in art, expressing a wholeness that includes us all. The best literature cultivates the imagination required for empathy, increases our understanding of human nature, deepens our comprehension of psychology, expands our vision of history, develops our sense of proportion, allows us vicariously to experience many other lives, and enlarges our participation in what some religions conceive as the “universal mind.”

APPROACHES

There are 4 main approaches to each of the major writers on this site; (1) Introduction to the writer; (2) quotations of the writer arranged as a monologue; (3) quotations of critics discussing the writer and his or her works; (4) close objective analysis of the writer’s most significant works.

STANDARDS

The standards on this site are aesthetic, intellectual and historical. This is politically incorrect, because literature transcends politics. Much of American literature subverts, attacks, ridicules and transcends the various successive forms of political correctness—or puritanisms—that have dominated American culture in each time period since 1620. My judgments emerge from a traditional literary education and a lifetime of studying and teaching authors and works judged by many scholars to be the most important to an understanding of literary history as a whole, giving the highest priority to American masterpieces and to those who wrote them. I am largely in agreement with the consensus of scholars before the barbarians purged them in the Culture War of the late 20th century. I try to transcend my personal taste by submitting to guidance from nearly 100 competing anthologies of American literature, from all the standard literary histories, from a library of scholarly books and articles, and from current research online. I highlight controversy, present divergent perspectives and include analysis by over a thousand other critics.

Much literary criticism during the Feminist Period (1970-present) is too political, reductive, subjective, theoretical, misleading, contextual and distant from the texts to be worth quoting. That is why there is so much less criticism on this site pertaining to writers since 1970 than to those before. Much of the best writing in American literature today is obscured or lost in chaos because Postmodern academics, editors and publishers ignored aesthetic standards to accommodate often mediocre Politically Correct writers belonging to privileged identity groups. In the long run of literary history writers are judged by their masterpieces, works of art that rise through time like peaks through clouds.

AMERICAN LITERATURE DEFINED

American literature is unified by (1) the subject of America and its people since 1620; (2) shared national experience, traditions, symbols, themes, motifs and forms; (3) respect for a diversity of beliefs and viewpoints; (4) the consensus of a large body of scholarship; and (5) the aesthetic and intellectual standards set by the masterpieces of world literature.

COVERAGE

The judgments made here, in particular with respect to *contemporary* literature, often do not accord with publishing hype nor with the Politically Correct grievance industry. The vast quantity of American writing published since the 1960s needs winnowing through close literary analysis and evaluation to assist readers in selecting what may appeal to them. I emphasize fiction because I know it best. Contemporary drama tends to be more theatrical than literary. The coverage here of contemporary poetry is insufficient, but I have spent over 5 years building this website and I need to get back to writing my own novels. Postmodern academics segregated literature by identity group: Women's, Feminist, Gay, Black, Jewish, Latino, Native American, Asian-American, Irish, and so on. This website is *integrated*. I do not presume to judge by my traditional mainstream literary standards many of the American writers included in the various sociological categories with their own criteria of inclusion. Many important writers fit more naturally into one or more of the "identity" canons than into the integrated mainstream canon.

CRITICAL METHOD

My method is strictly objective literary analysis in the tradition of New Criticism, the empirical basis for the theory set forth in "Model of Metaphors," plus eclecticism for additional insights. First I enjoy a work of literature subjectively on its own terms, as I do when enjoying the culture of a different country. Then I think about it, analyze it objectively in aesthetic, intellectual and historical terms, and evaluate it according to the standards set by masterpieces in the past. At the same time I have adapted my style to the Web, including subjectivity of appreciation and the rhetoric of persuasion, since the public prefers prose with some personality to academic criticism that reads like it was written by the dead.

KEY TERMS

Key terms here are *irony*, *metaphor*, *symbol*, *archetype*, *allegory*, *individuation*, *puritan*, *pastoral*, and *transcendental*. See the general index and "Model of Metaphors."

MECHANICS

The new consciousness induced by the Internet has persuaded me to construct this website for the eyes of impatient readers. Accordingly, I tend to (1) write short sentences; (2) keep paragraphs short; (3) break up quoted paragraphs that look too long; (4) compress everything to essentials; (5) avoid spelling out numbers; (6) eliminate single quotation marks within double quotation marks when I think I can get away with it; (7) eliminate spaces in ellipses; (8) use lots of centered headlines; (9) cite few secondary sources; (10) specialize in what is not easily accessible elsewhere; (11) reduce complexities to oversimplified lists; and (12) make generalizations and absolute value judgments, especially about long-established major authors. The primary spatial metaphors—City, Garden, Wilderness, Sky—are sometimes capitalized to refer to the archetypal paradigm explained in "Model of Metaphors." For the convenience of users, indexes of analyses include short commentaries; and the index of analyses of "novels" includes novellas, mixed genres, and unified story collections.

POLICIES

I regret that I do not have time to accept submissions of work for consideration. I read and appreciate but do not have time to answer messages. There are too many. In response to demands for permission or payment I remove the material. That is why some deserving writers are not included here. If you copy something for use, please credit the author and AmerLit.com.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am indebted to the generations of students and teachers and librarians before me who have sustained American literature, and to the thousands of scholars and critics I have quoted. The documents on this website were edited by my wife Judy Hollister and they were put online by our son Dane Gunderson. The American eagle logo is by Bob Engle.

Michael A. Hollister (January 2015)