

PERIODS OF AMERICAN LITERATURE

British Perspective

“Any division of literary history is an arbitrary over-simplification. In the case of America, where the national record long predates the development of a self-sufficient literature, the problem is complicated further by the fact that most divisions into early periods are based on political and social history and most divisions into later periods on the dominance of literary types or movements. Almost all historians of American literature have made their own systems of period division”:

Colonial Period, 1607-1765
Revolutionary and Early National Period, 1765-1830
Romantic Period, 1830-1865
Realistic Period, 1865-1900
Naturalistic and Symbolistic Period, 1900-1930
Period of Conformity and Criticism, 1930-1960
Period of the Confessional Self, 1960-

C. Hugh Holman & William Harmon
A Handbook to Literature, 6th edition
(Macmillan 1936-92)

American Perspective

Puritan Period, 1620-1722: *Mayflower Compact* (1620)
Neoclassical Period, 1722-1798: Ben Franklin, *The Dogood Papers* (1722)
Romantic Period, 1798-1861: Charles Brockden Brown, *Wieland* (1798)
Realist Period, 1861-1930: Civil War begins (1861)
Naturalist Period, 1893-1925: Stephen Crane, *Maggie* (1893)
Modernist Period, 1909-1962: Gertrude Stein, “Picasso” (1909)
Postmodern Period, 1961-present: Joseph Heller, *Catch-22* (1961)
Feminist Period: 1970-present: Margaret Atwood, *Surfacing* (1972), North American

These periods overlap: Puritanism continued through Victorianism into the 20th century. In the late 19th century Neoclassicism revived as a component in Realism and subsequently in Modernism. Realism continues throughout the 20th century as the mainstream tradition in American fiction, represented at its best by writers including John Steinbeck, Caroline Gordon, William Styron, Wallace Stegner, Robert Stone, Richard Ford, Tobias Wolfe, Bobbie Anne Mason, and Anne Tyler. Naturalism continues in social protest fiction, war fiction, cybernetic fiction and science fiction. Modernism continues blended with other modes--ethnic, Gothic, Realist, Naturalist--in Katherine Anne Porter, Gordon, Flannery O'Connor, Eudora Welty, Toni Morrison, Louise Erdrich, Tim O'Brien, Don DeLillo, Cormac McCarthy, Marilynne Robinson and others.

During the Postmodern Period, elite critics exalted Academic Expressionism--Thomas Pynchon, John Barth, William Gaddis, Walter Abish, James McElroy, Donald Barthelme, Susan Sontag, Renata Adler, Don DeLillo, David Foster Wallace, and others. Postmodernist literary pretensions were a “cosmic bubble” in elite academic culture that had deflated by 2008, the year Wallace hanged himself. The Postmodern Period includes the Feminist Period, a polarization of the genders.

Michael Hollister (2015)