

PRIMARY MODES OF THE EARLY AMERICAN NOVEL

These *primary modes* are archetypal: They express universal human characteristics such as desire, pity, curiosity, fear, humor, catharsis, and spiritual aspiration. "American literary *modes*" (on a different document) are cultural: They describe aesthetic values that recur in different forms through literary history and are specific to particular cultures and periods--Puritanism, Neoclassicism, Romanticism, Realism, Naturalism, Impressionism, Imagism, Expressionism, Modernism--or are unique to a particular time and place: Postmodernism and Minimalism.

SENTIMENTAL / PATHETIC

Sometimes called "conventional." Surviving fragments of fiction from ancient Greece are *sentimental* in the sense of being about sentiments, love and matters of the heart. The first two "modern novels," *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1747), by the British bourgeois Samuel Richardson, are prototypes of the *sentimental* and the *pathetic* modes of the novel, respectively. Most of the first American novels were modeled on these two melodramas of sexual harassment, with the typical plot of a virtuous female resisting a seducer. The first American novels *The Power of Sympathy* (1789) by William Hill Brown, *Charlotte Temple* (1791) by Susanna Rowson, and *The Coquette* (1797) by Hannah Foster are pathetic. In short, the *sentimental* has a happy ending, the *pathetic* an unhappy ending, but the visions and values of both modes in early America are essentially the same: They convey a fundamentally stable social world in which proper values are generally consistent with the prevailing assumptions, beliefs, ideals and conventions of middle-class Christian society. These two modes address "women's issues," are intended to be *empirical*, and are cautionary, didactic, pious and commercial as distinct from literary. Today, about half of all paperback novels sold in the United States are variations in the *sentimental/pathetic* tradition, along a spectrum of types from Christian to radical Feminist, the *pathetic* often blending with the popular (as distinct from literary) *Gothic*.

EMPIRICAL

The origin of literary [Realism](#) and [Naturalism](#) and of the popular [detective genre](#), deriving from the tradition of philosophical empiricism and the inductive method. Literary prototypes: Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and *Moll Flanders* (1722). An enormously influential early example of the detective novel was William Godwin's *Adventures of Caleb Williams* (1794). Charles Brockden Brown's *Edgar Huntley* (1799) was the first American detective novel and Poe's story "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841) established most of the conventions of the detective genre: In a rational world of understandable natural and social phenomena a protagonist solves or defines problems by studying facts acquired through observation of evidence in the light of reason and established principles. The protagonist solves a case or *is* a case. That is, he or she solves a particular problem, usually intellectual, or illustrates one, usually social, as a representative cultural type or typical case. Like the first English novels, the first American novels are "case studies," hence *empirical* as well as *sentimental* or *pathetic*, but most of them are so formulaic, even when based upon actual cases, they can hardly be regarded today as much more than pseudo-empirical sermons. In literary fiction, the *empirical* is often expressed in dramatic tension with the *Gothic*, as in Brown, Poe, Pynchon and Cormac McCarthy. The empirical also blends with the mythic in "travel literature" exploiting popular interest in exotic places, such as Poe's *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838) and Melville's *Typee* (1846).

GOTHIC

Derives from tales of terror and the supernatural. In early medieval history the Goths were a single Germanic tribe, but later "Gothic" referred to the medieval in general. In the rationalistic 18th century with its Neoclassical aesthetic values, the term came to mean barbaric. The magnificent cathedrals of the Middle Ages were scorned as "Gothic." A "Gothic revival" in Romantic reaction against Neoclassicism and the limits of reason began in England when in 1747 Horace Walpole settled at Strawberry Hill, Twickenham and made his home a little Gothic castle, then wrote the first *Gothic* romance, *The Castle of Otranto* (1764). Other novelists followed his example, notably Matthew ("Monk") Lewis and Ann Radcliffe in England and E. T. A. Hoffman in Germany. The popular *Gothic*--including crime fiction, pulp or dime novels--with a tone and emphasis the opposite of conventional, is sometimes called "sensationalist" or "subversive." Several of the first American novels were likewise popular *Gothic* entertainments, but Brown and Poe

initiated a serious literary *Gothic* tradition. In the United States, as exemplified by Brown in *Wieland* (1798), the literary *Gothic* mode was influenced by Calvinism. It is comparable to Greek tragedy without gods: An irrational universe is dominated by chance, chaos, force, violence, perversion and madness. Evil triumphs over good and moral order is lost. More a victim than a hero or heroine, the protagonist is doomed to catastrophe by circumstances beyond his or her control, not of his or her creation. A person is relatively helpless, and is lucky to survive and to maintain sanity. In the “sublime gothic,” wonder and a paradoxical or perverse exaltation are consolations. Later in the 19th century Naturalism was a blend of the empirical and the Gothic, as in Crane’s *Maggie* (1893). Most fiction depicting social oppression, such as the feminist “literature of misery” and much African-American literature, is *Gothic* or *Naturalistic* in the sense of emphasizing determinism and victimization. In the mid-20th century “black humor” is a blend of the *Gothic* and the *comic*, and today the *Gothic* also informs *postmodernist* fiction, as in Pynchon, McCarthy and Don DeLillo.

COMIC

Derives from folk humor, traditional satire, comic drama and picaresque fiction (stories of rogues or picaoons), especially Cervantes and Fielding. The *comic* may be either light or dark: In a social world of foolish, corrupt, and dangerous people, follies, faults and crimes are exposed. The *comic* hero or heroine is usually doomed to difficulty, embarrassment, perhaps even disaster by his or her own limitations or naivete in a harsh, complex, appalling, perhaps terrifying world of grotesques, rogues and deceivers. Traditionally, Americans have been considered naive, especially by Europeans, and innocence is an especially strong theme throughout American literature. By literary standards the most successful early American novel in the *comic* mode is Hugh Henry Brackenridge’s *Modern Chivalry* (1792-1815). This is a sort of American *Don Quixote*, a very funny satire on absurdities of democracy in the early United States, based largely on Brackenridge’s own embittering political experiences. Also picaresque and political are *The Algerine Captive* (1797) by Royall Tyler, a satire of college education in New England, quack medicine in the backwoods and slavery; and *Female Quixotism: Exhibited in the Romantic Opinions and Extravagant Adventures of Dorcasina Sheldon* (1801) by Tabitha Tenney, a satire of romantic women readers of *sentimental* and popular *Gothic* novels. Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* (1884) is by far the most popular American *comic* novel and Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* (1985) is the best American *comic* novel about academic life and popular culture.

TRAGIC

Influenced almost exclusively by Shakespeare, and to a lesser extent Milton, the tragic informs and shapes the two greatest American novels before the Civil War, Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) and Melville’s *Moby-Dick* (1851), as well as *Pierre* (1852) and *Billy Budd* (1891). Some of this influence may also be seen in Cooper’s *Leatherstocking Saga* of Natty Bumppo. In the American novel the *tragic* is often merged with the *mythic*: We live in a mysterious universe of contending principles and forces--self and society, desire and duty, passion and reason, freedom and discipline. To forestall catastrophe a person must harmonize these principles and balance these forces, which is sometimes impossible. Evil temporarily triumphs over good. Moral order or natural harmony or psychological balance is lost and then restored at great cost. The *tragic* hero (or heroine) is doomed to catastrophe by circumstances largely or wholly beyond his or her control, but created to some extent by himself. He differs from the *Gothic* protagonist in being to some extent responsible for his own catastrophe, and in resisting the forces that ultimately devastate him. More significantly, he also differs in that he comes to terms philosophically with himself and the universe, resigns himself to his catastrophe, and through this acceptance to some extent transcends his suffering. Later examples of the *tragic* mode in the American novel include Edith Wharton’s *Ethan Frome* (1911), Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925), Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) and Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* (1929).

MYTHIC

This is the mainstream of the greatest American fiction. It derives from myth, dream, fable, epic, allegory (especially by Shakespeare, Milton, Bunyan), historical romance (especially by Sir Walter Scott) and the English romantic poets. In early American fiction it includes Irving’s “Rip Van Winkle” (1819); Cooper’s *Leatherstocking Saga* (1823-41)--an American epic of discovery comparable to Virgil’s *Aeneid*; Poe’s *Pym* and other works; and all of Hawthorne and Melville: We live in a mysterious universe of incessant change, in which a person must seek eternal meaning in the history of human experience,

collective and personal, but especially in experience recognized as archetypal, or broadly representative. Moral values are derived from a deep personal sense of rightness, rather than from the assumptions, laws, mores or conventions of society. A vision of eternal meaning is revealed through a symbolic, often broadly allegorical drama or saga with profound historical, cultural and psychological resonance. Often larger than life, the *mythic* hero or heroine is an imaginary cultural type or archetype, sometimes modeled on a real historical figure, personifying major philosophical or popular ideas. The tone is legendary, often with Biblical portentousness. Hawthorne saw himself as an “Artist of the Beautiful” mediating the divine truth of God. Melville wrote his own Gospels: *Moby-Dick* is his Old Testament, *Billy Budd* his new, and last, testament. Later writers who are conspicuously *mythic* include Cather, Eliot, Hemingway, Faulkner, Porter, O’Connor, Toni Morrison, Cormac McCarthy, Louise Erdrich, and Marilynne Robinson. The *mythic* mode often dramatizes the individuation process leading to holistic consciousness and a transcendentalism, explained in “[Model of Metaphors.](#)”

Michael Hollister (2015)