

AMERICAN CHARACTERS Theme Essay

Book List:

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, by Mark Twain (1884)
Walden; or, Life in the Woods, by Henry David Thoreau (1854)
Final Harvest: Emily Dickinson's Poems (1858-1955)
Their Eyes Were Watching God, by Zora Neale Hurston (1937)
The Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway (1923-1938)
The Great Gatsby, by F. Scott Fitzgerald (1925)

In a world changing at an incredibly rapid rate, in which reading itself seems threatened, books which have stimulated and sustained readers for decades are in danger of being lost in the buzz of our audio-video sound-bite multi-media culture. Many readers today doubt that writers from the past have anything to say to the fast moving 21st century.

We believe that the great "classic" American writers still have a great deal to say, some of them more now than when they were written. This Let's Talk About It series aims to give these older writers an opportunity to present their message today. Our method is to approach these classic texts from two opposite but mutually reinforcing points of view: as stories of individuals and as stories of culture.

Just as any culture is understood through its individuals, so are individuals understood through their culture. Literature directs us both ways, since it portrays both individual persons (the author as well as people in the book) and the culture in which they live. Individual and culture reinforce and explain each other.

The title of this series, American Characters, indicates this double perspective, since the word "character" points in both directions. One of its definitions is the nature, qualities, and behavior patterns of a society; thus we can talk about "the American character." Another meaning is a noteworthy, eccentric, memorable individual.

"Character" in the first sense the distinctive nature of a culture is something about which our best authors should be able to tell us. The ability to describe, analyze, and reflect society is a major reason why a writer might be considered classic, or worth reading, in the first place.

A character in the second sense is an individual with outstanding qualities who is also unusual in a colorful way, a fascinating personality. Most geniuses qualify as characters; so do most of the memorable characters in fiction. Mark Twain is a character, and so are his Huckleberry Finn and the slave Jim; Henry Thoreau is a character both in and

out of Walden; Emily Dickinson, Zora Neale Hurston, and Ernest Hemingway are all characters, as are the most memorable people who inhabit their fiction and poetry.

Looking for characters in this second sense allows us freely to gossip, psychoanalyze, judge, sympathize however we may want to respond to the authors or the fictional people they create. Character defined as the nature of a society, however, involves knowing so much the United States being so vast and various that it may seem daunting. Can we talk at all about a single American character? Is there such a thing as "the American character"?

For generations most historians and social commentators assumed that there was, and they spent millions of words trying to identify and describe the essence of the United States. Usually they assumed this essence to be European, and in particular English; racially of course it was white. This dominant "American" race/culture did not automatically exclude other races and cultures, but it tried to control them either by restricting their members' rights and opportunities or by transforming them so that they became "mainstream Americans." This was the idea of the great American melting pot that re-molds other cultures into the traditional image of the "American."

In recent years the inadequacy of the "melting pot" metaphor has become clearer. As a description of what has happened in American history, it is only partially accurate; as an assertion of what should happen, it is suspect. We have grown to know the value of cultural diversity as well as the mere fact of it in our complex history. It makes sense to talk in the plural about the American characters who give us a pluralistic culture of endless richness and difference. As Americans we need to understand, accept, and appreciate the differences.

Although this Let's Talk About It series does not attempt a representative sample of American cultural "characters," it does range broadly

- from the Mississippi Valley during the time of slavery (Twain),
- to pre-Civil War New England as seen by a radical idealist and reformer (Thoreau),
- to New England society in the later 19th-century seen from a somewhat alienated woman's perspective (Dickinson),
- to black culture in the South as seen by a woman determined to find a fulfilling life (Hurston),
- to the 20th-century society of the disaffected and alienated, trying in various places--the United States, Africa, Spain--to find meaning in life and reasons for living (Hemingway).

The range of LTAI themes, taken together, provides a broad cultural survey. But for American Characters we have chosen classic texts, and part of the idea of a "classic" is that it has to be around long enough to establish its meaningfulness to people beyond

the time and place of its origin. Classics are products of local culture, but they can speak to people of other cultures, other ages.

It takes time to establish such a range: the most recent text in this program was published in 1937, the earliest in 1854. We hope you will enjoy going back into the past in search of American characters. You will find both the past and the present in them. You can decide what each has to say in our time.

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, by Mark Twain (1884)

A scathing critic of American culture, Mark Twain was no less hard on himself. "Well," he wrote to a friend, "I am a great and sublime fool. But then I am God's fool, and all His works must be contemplated with respect." Whatever the target of his criticism, Twain can make us laugh, even when despair is behind the humor.

Twain was a "character" not only in the flamboyance of his personality and his matchless wit, but also in the conflicts that drove his personality. These conflicts are indicated by the continuing competition between his two names: Samuel L. Clemens and Mark Twain, which still give librarians and indexers fits trying to decide what to call him.

The values and allegiances of Clemens / Twain were typically divided. He wanted to thumb his nose at society, but also to be successful in it. He wanted to be the writer of democracy, of the people, but he also wanted the upper-class culture of the East coast to accept him. Even his writing style changed, according to his sense of purpose and audience.

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is his greatest book, partly because it is held together by his greatest character, the narrator Huck, and partly because it criticizes the cruelties and hypocrisies of American culture so powerfully. The novel condemns the various A scathing critic of American culture, Mark Twain was no less hard on himself. "Well," he wrote to a friend, "I am a great and sublime fool. But then I am God's fool, and all His works must be contemplated with respect." Whatever the target of his criticism, Twain can make us laugh, even when despair is behind the humor.

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Religion, social position, fraud, mob violence: all these are described; but the extreme example of cruelty and taking advantage of others is, of course, slavery. At the book's core is Huck's relation to the slave Jim, and much of the novel's brilliant irony comes from Huck's condemning himself for the same feelings and actions toward Jim which readers (and the author) applaud and love him for. It is also a very funny book.

Walden; or, Life in the Woods, by Henry David Thoreau (1854)

Read the following chapters:

- "Economy"
- "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For"
- "The Bean-Field"
- "The Village"
- "The Ponds"
- "Higher Laws"
- "Brute Neighbors"
- "Spring"
- "Conclusion."

Thoreau is not just a character; he has also been called a hypocrite, egomaniac, sponger, snob, fraud, misogynist, prig, and woods-burner. Readers still get furious at him because he challenges our ways of living. But we keep reading, because he confronts us at the core of our lives: our goals and desires, and our relation to others, society, nature, and God. His influence has been important in several areas: civil rights, conservation and concern for the environment, social and political criticism, and the (famously American) philosophy of individualism.

Thoreau decided that he could see life and the world more clearly if he lived by himself for a while, so he stayed two years by the shore of Walden Pond, a few miles from his hometown, Concord, Massachusetts. He wanted to test his idea that the key to living a full life is to simplify it: "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived."

Final Harvest: Emily Dickinson's Poems (1858-1955)

After Emily Dickinson's death, her sister Lavinia was astonished to find a locked box with 1,775 poems inside. She also left about 10,000 eloquent letters. Many theories about her personal life -- such as unrequited love or unfulfilling parental relations -- have tried to explain the nature of her poetic genius. But perhaps it's best to just accept the fact of it:

This was a Poet -- It is That
Distills amazing sense
From ordinary meanings.

Dickinson was not, however, just "a poet": she has been called "the greatest of women poets," "the best American poet," and "one of the greatest lyric poets of all time." She has also been called "the female [Marquis de] Sade," but that's another story.

She lived in Puritan New England in the days of that culture's decline. Her poems often show outrage at the rigid social conventions of her culture, and at the Puritan God who, she thought in certain moods, had victimized the world. Dickinson is a poet of social and religious criticism, but, probably more important, she is a poet of individual feeling: of love and loneliness, expectation and renunciation, death and its effect on the living. And she wrote wonderful poems of delight at being alive in the world of nature and of people.

Typically her poems express insights and observations which startle the reader; though she advised to

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant --
Success in Circuit lies

.....

The truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind --

She told her truths as directly as anyone ever has. She dazzles abruptly.

Their Eyes Were Watching God, by Zora Neale Hurston (1937)

Hurston grew up in an atypical black community: Eatonville, Florida, the only incorporated all-black town in the United States. She learned there that blacks could be independent, self-governing, and successful. And so she went off and succeeded, graduating from Barnard College in 1928 and then working under the well-known anthropologist Franz Boas, collecting Afro-American folk tales and songs.

Gradually her writing turned from anthropology to fiction, but her fiction always showed her love for the culture she studied and lived in, as well as her powers of observation. She was a character, known for her wit and her story-telling ability; she could (a biographer writes) "walk into a room of strangers . . . and almost immediately gather people, charm, amuse, and impress them." Her non-political stance was not popular with black intellectuals, however. She was too much an individualist to fit anyone else's mold.

After the 1930s her reputation gradually declined. The broad interest in Afro-American culture during the 1930s diminished, and with the preoccupations of World War II, Hurston lost her readers. Hard work eventually wore her out, and she, the best black woman writer of her time, died alone in poverty, in 1960.

Their Eyes Were Watching God tells of Janie Crawford's search for freedom and fulfillment through her participation in black culture. It is as important that Janie is a woman it is that she is black; the combination of these two qualities made *Their Eyes Were Watching God* a groundbreaking novel whose example more recent black women writers, like Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, have followed.

The Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway (1923-1938)

Read the following stories:

- "Indian Camp"
- "The Killers"
- "The Snows of Kilimanjaro"
- "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber"
- "Hills Like White Elephants"
- "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place."

In his later years Hemingway's deep emotional life, long hidden beneath the tough-guy image, tormented him. He suffered from a sense of failed relationships, from advancing age that slowed him down, and from fear that his writing ability was declining. These feelings, out of control, made him mentally ill and led to his death, as we all know, by suicide in Ketchum, Idaho, in 1961. It was a shame; his son Jack said, "I keep thinking what a wonderful old man he would have made if he had learned how."

Until his last years Hemingway led a very fast and exciting life. Always he promoted himself; few American authors have cultivated their media image, their personal mystique, as he did. The Hemingway "character" includes his roles as war hero and correspondent, big game hunter, deep sea fisherman, aficionado of bull fighting, husband of four wives, and cavorter with the famous and rich.

His personality threatens to overshadow his writing, but it is always refreshing to return to his fictional creations. He did his best work in the short stories. These stories, written in the 1920s and 1930s when Hemingway was in the prime of his life and career, will take you to Michigan and Chicago, Spain and Africa. More important, they will take you into the minds of some of Hemingway's most powerful characters, most of them American.

The Great Gatsby by F. Scott Fitzgerald (1925)

The decadence and excess of the Jazz Age are chronicled in this story of the quest for the American Dream by self-made millionaire Jay Gatsby. Gatsby pursues his love Daisy Buchanan, who remains beyond his reach despite the wealth that Gatsby has amassed. .

“*The Great Gatsby* may be the most popular classic in modern American fiction. Since its publication in 1925, Fitzgerald's masterpiece has become a touchstone for generations of readers and writers, many of whom reread it every few years as a ritual of imaginative renewal. The story of Jay Gatsby's desperate quest to win back his first love reverberates with themes at once characteristically American and universally human, among them the importance of honesty, the temptations of wealth, and the struggle to escape the past. Though *The Great Gatsby* runs to fewer than two hundred pages, there is no bigger read in American literature.” - *National Endowment for the Arts, The Big Read website: <http://www.neabigread.org/books/greatgatsby/index.php>.*

Writer F. Scott Fitzgerald came to epitomize the Jazz Age, the name he gave to the decade after World War I, when the economy roared and the flaunting of authority brought about by Prohibition was breaking down the traditional morality of the Victorian Age. The conflicts of the 1920s were primarily cultural, pitting a more cosmopolitan, modernist, urban culture against a more provincial, traditionalist, rural culture. Fitzgerald came from an upper-class background in the Midwest. Educated in Princeton, he left without a degree. He moved to New York City, and in 1920, he married Zelda Sayre. It was their tempestuous relationship that fueled much of his writing—magazine articles, short stories and novels. Although they found success after the publication of *The Great Gatsby* in 1925, their lives were overshadowed by mental illness (Zelda's) and alcoholism (Scott's). They both died in their forties. [Added June 2009]

For Further Reading on American Characters

Studies of American Literature and Culture

- Bellah, Robert, et al. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (California, 1985)
- Buell, Lawrence. *New England Literary Culture: From Revolution to Renaissance* (Cambridge, 1986)
- Eisenberg, Lee and Phillip Moffit, eds. *The Soul of America [25 selections illustrating that "Place defines America"]* (Scribners, 1986)
- Huggins, Nathan Irvin. *Harlem Renaissance* (Oxford, 1971)
- Martin, Jay. *Harvests of Change: American Literature, 1965-1914* (Prentice, 1967)
- Matthiesson, F. O. *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (Oxford, 1941)
- Smith, Henry Nash. *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Harvard, 1950)
- Wiebe, Robert H. *The Segmented Society: An Introduction to the Meaning of America* (Oxford, 1975)

A Sampling of Other American Classics

- Anderson, Sherwood. Winesburg, Ohio (1919)
- Bellamy, Edward. Looking Backward (1888)
- Black Elk and John G. Neihardt. Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Ogalala Sioux. (1932)
- Cather, Willa. O Pioneers! (1913)
- Chopin, Kate. The Awakening. (1899)
- Crane, Stephen. The Red Badge of Courage (1895)
- Davis, Rebecca Harding. Life in the Iron Mills (1861)
- Douglass, Frederick. The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written By Himself (1844)
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "Self-Reliance," "Experience," and other essays (1830's and 1840's)
- Faulkner, William. Absalom, Absalom! (1936)
- Franklin, Benjamin. The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin (written 1771-1790; published 1868)
- Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. The Yellow Wallpaper (1892)
- Hawthorne, Nathaniel. The Scarlet Letter. (1850)
- Melville, Herman. Moby Dick (1851)
- Steinbeck, John. The Grapes of Wrath (1939)
- Whitman, Walt. Leaves of Grass (1855-1892)

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