



## Why Am I Reading This? Theme Information

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 present.

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.

## Book List

1. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, by Mark Twain (1884)
2. *The Age of Innocence*, by Edith Wharton (1920)
3. *The Catcher in the Rye*, by J. D. Salinger (1951)
4. *The Complete Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway*, by Ernest Hemingway (1923–1938)
5. *Final Harvest: Emily Dickinson’s Poems*, by Emily Dickson (1858–1886)
6. *The Grapes of Wrath*, by John Steinbeck (1939)
7. *The Great Gatsby*, by F. Scott Fitzgerald (1925)
8. *Invisible Man*, by Ralph Ellison (1952)
9. *Little Women*, by Louisa May Alcott (1868)
10. *The Old Man and the Sea*, by Ernest Hemingway (1952)
11. *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, by Mark Twain (1894)
12. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, by Zora Neale Hurston (1937)
13. *To Kill a Mockingbird*, by Harper Lee (1960)
14. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, by Harriet Beecher Stowe (1852)
15. *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*, by Henry David Thoreau (1854)
16. *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, by L. Frank Baum (1900)

# Theme Essay

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 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.

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 19<sup>th</sup>-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 (Hurstun)
- to the 20<sup>th</sup>-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 Classics, we have chosen classic texts, and part of the idea of a “classic” is that it has to have been 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 1952, 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.

# For Further Reading:

## Studies of American Literature and Culture

*Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, by Robert Bellah (Calif., 1985)

*New England Literary Culture: From Revolution to Renaissance*, by Lawrence Buell (Cambridge, 1986)

*The Soul of America (25 selections illustrating that “place defines America”)*, by Lee Eisenberg and Phillip Moffit, eds. (Scribners, 1986)

*Harlem Renaissance*, by Nathan Irvin Huggins (Oxford, 1971)

*Harvests of Change: American Literature, 1965-1914* (Prentice, 1967)

*American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*, by F. O. Matthiesson (Oxford, 1941)

*Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*, by Henry Nash Smith (Harvard, 1950)

*The Segmented Society: An Introduction to the Meaning of America*, by Robert H. Wiebe (Oxford, 1975)

*Things Fall Apart*, by Chinua Achedbe (Nigeria, novel, 1958)

*Woman at Point Zero*, by Nawal Al-Saadawi (Egypt, novella, 1975)

## By the Authors

Mark Twain

*Roughing It* (1872)

*The Innocents Abroad* (1869)

*The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876)

*A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* (1889)

*The Mysterious Stranger* (1916)

*Letters* (several editions available)

Henry David Thoreau

*Journal* (1906, 1992)

*The Maine Woods* (1864)

“Resistance to Civil Government” or “Civil Disobedience” (1849)

“Life Without Principle” (1863)

“Slavery in Massachusetts” (1854)

Emily Dickinson

*Letters* (Harvard, 1958)

*The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* (Harvard, 1960)

Zora Neale Hurston

*Mules and Men* (1935)

*Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942)

*I Love Myself When I am Laughing...and Then Again When I am Looking Mean and Impressive:*

*A Zora Neale Hurston Reader* (1979)

Ernest Hemingway

*The Sun Also Rises* (1926)

*A Farewell to Arms* (1929)

*For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1939)

*A Moveable Feast* (1964)

*Selected Letters, 1917-1961* (Scribners, 1981)

## A Sampling of Other American Classics

*Winesburg*, Sherwood Anderson (1919)

*Looking Backward*, Edward Bellamy (1888)

*Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Ogalala Sioux*, Black Elk and John G. Heihardt (1932)

*O Pioneers!* Willa Cather (1913)

*The Awakening*, Kate Chopin (1899)

*The Red Badge of Courage*, Stephen Crane (1895)

*Life in the Iron Mills*, Rebecca Harding Davis (1861)

*The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*, Frederick Douglass (1844)

"*Self-Reliance*," "*Experience*," and other essays, Ralph Waldo Emerson (1830's and 1840's)

*Absalom, Absalom!* William Faulkner (1936)

*The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, Benjamin Franklin (written 1771-1790; pub. 1868)

*The Yellow Wallpaper*, Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1892)

*The Scarlet Letter*, Nathaniel Hawthorne (1850)

*Moby Dick*, Herman Melville (1851)

*Leaves of Grass*, Walt Whitman (1855-1892)