

‘HISTORY OF AMERICAN LITERATURE’

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ABSTRACT:-

In this history of American literature, In particular, I have tried to register the plurality of American culture and American writing, the continued inventing of communities, and the sustained imagining of nations, that constitute the literary history of the United States. My aim here has been to provide the reader with a reasonably concise but also coherent narrative that concentrates on significant and symptomatic writers while also registering the range and variety of American writing. Full scope of American literature: work that illustrates important literary or cultural trends or helps to measure the multicultural character of American writing. In sum, my aim has been to offer as succinct an account as possible of the major achievements in American literature and of American difference, what it is that distinguishes the American literary tradition and also what it is that makes it extraordinarily, fruitfully diverse.

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Keywords:- Constitute, Symptomatic Writers, Multicultural character, fruitfully diverse, sustained imagining and distinguishes.

HISTORY OF AMERICAN LITERATURE

During the first half of the nineteenth century, the United States was transformed from an infant republic into a large, self-confident nation, albeit a nation divided and eventually torn apart, as Thomas Jefferson had feared, by the burning issue of slavery. The population more than trebled, from nine to thirty-one million. The rapid expansion of the railroad and manufacturing industry began shifting the national economic basis and the population from country to town. The United States itself expanded from its eastern seaboard base of sixteen states to assume continental dimensions. As the nation grew, so did the opportunities for writers. The lecture circuit generated huge audiences across the country. Newspapers and magazines proliferated. And one of the most literate populations in the world, eager for entertainment and information, opened up the possibility of writing as a means of making a Living.

Many pursued that possibility. Some – like Susan Warren (1839–1885), author of *The Wide, Wide World* (1850), the first American novel to sell more than a million copies – even succeeded. Irving was now famous as an author, wit, and man of society, and to consolidate his reputation he published *A History of New York from the Beginning of the World to the End of the Dutch Dynasty* (1809) under the pen name of Diedrich Knickerbocker. Often regarded as the first important work of comic literature written by an American, it initiated the term Knickerbocker School for authors like Irving himself, Paulding, Fitz-Greene Halleck (1790–1867), and Joseph Rodman Drake (1795–1820), who wrote about little old New York in the years before the Civil War. Then, in 1820, he published his most enduring work, *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent*, a collection of essays and sketches that was enormously successful in both England and the United States. *The Sketch Book* contains two small masterpieces that initiated the great tradition of the American short story, *Rip Van Winkle* and *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*. Four other sketches are also set in America, but most of the other pieces are descriptive and thoughtful essays on England, where Irving was still living. Both *Rip Van Winkle* and *Sleepy Hollow* have origins in German folklore. Irving admits as much in a Note to the first tale. Both also owe a debt, in terms of stylistic influence, to Sir Walter Scott. Nevertheless, both exploit their specifically American settings and create American myths they explore the social and cultural transformations occurring in America at the time in terms that are at once gently whimsical and perfectly serious. In *Rip Van Winkle*, the lazy, henpecked hero of the story ventures into the Catskill Mountains of New York State to discover there some little men in Dutch costume bowling at ninepins. Taking many draughts of some strange beverage they have brewed, he falls into a deep sleep.

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When he returns to his village, after waking up, he eventually realizes that twenty years have passed, the Revolution has been and gone, and that, instead of being a subject of his Majesty George the Third, he was now a free citizen of the United States. The news naturally takes a long time to sink in; and, at first, when he is surrounded in his home place by people whom he does not recognize and who do not recognize him, he begins to doubt his own identity. His dilemma is a gently comic response to traumatic change; and it offers a genial reflection in miniature of the sudden, disconcerting process of alteration and possible reactions to it experienced by the nation as a whole. A similar transposition of American history into American legend occurs in *Sleepy Hollow*. This story of how the superstitious hero, Chabot Crane, was bested by the headless horseman of Broom Bones, an extrovert Dutchman and Crane's rival in love, allows Irving to parody several forms of narrative, among them tall tales, ghost stories, and the epic. But it also permits him, once again, to reflect on change and to present a vanishing America, which is the setting for this story, as an endangered pastoral ideal. The tendency towards a more lyrical, romantic strain suggested by Irving's evocation of the sleepy hollow where Chabot Crane lived became a characteristic of his later work. Irving's subsequent career was erratic, and he never recovered the wit and fluency of his early style. Nevertheless, in his best work, he was a creator of significant American myths: narratives that gave dramatic substance to the radical changes of the time, and the nervousness and nostalgia those changes often engendered. Perhaps he was so effective in fashioning those myths because the nervousness about the new America, and nostalgia for the old and, beyond that, for Europe were something that he himself felt intensely. He was writing himself, and the feelings he typified, into legend.

Literature in the second half of the twentieth century in the United States bears only a faint resemblance to the writing accomplished between 1900 and 1950. Early in the century, arguments as to what distinguished American literature from British led to the emphasis on plain character and plain language that marked the writing done in both realism and naturalism. Then, with the modernist sweep to overthrow most existing literary traditions the innovation that made American poetry, fiction, and drama of keen interest to the world settled in. By 1950, however, traditional aesthetic innovation was wearing thin. The United States had endured the Great Depression, a long decade of hardship that not only dampened the promise of the American dream but changed literary methods to a surprising extent. The amalgam of cryptic modernist innovation and almost sentimental proselytizing that characterized the collective, proletarian novel and the speech-lined poems of the Depression gave rise to incredible variety: despite the paper shortages of World War II, published writing in the United States continued to be influential. It is in the aftermath of the war, once people had righted their perceptions about

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causation and blame, and had admitted again the atrocity of war itself that literature whether called contemporary or Postmodern began to change. Modernism's heavy seriousness gave way at times to a strangely comic irony. The power of United States bombs to destroy cities and families instantly had taught readers the risks of too placid a belief system: even without the Second World War, the Cold War remained. European existentialism crept into works by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. J. D. Salinger, John Barth, Thomas Berger, and later Donald Barthelme, Terry Southern, Joseph Heller, and others. Even as writers as distinguished as Flannery O'Connor, Nathanael West, and Vladimir Nabokov had separately approached those

Tones, the congruence of a number of writers working in both serious fiction and the more experimental genre of science fiction made the advent of the ironic and the irreligious a dominant strain. The marketing of books also played a role in what happened to writing at midcentury. Categories that would have seemed contrived during the 1920s, and certainly during the 1930s, came into existence; black literature, Jewish literature, women are writing, and with James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* the literature of sexual difference. Descriptive markers created new kinds of demands in that publishers couldn't feature just one novel by an African American writer; instead, they opted for several on that part of their list. Currents began almost by accident. The comedy inherent in Ralph Ellison's 1952 *Invisible Man*, for instance, linked this first novel by an African American with the mid-century production of white male writers. Once the category of black writing or, in that period, Negro writing was introduced, work by Margaret Walker, Ann Petri, James Baldwin, Paula Marshall, and others found publication. It is, of course, a commonplace that United States literature changed dramatically during the 1960s.

CONCLUSION:-

When the English preacher and writer Sidney Smith asked in 1820, In the four quarters of the globe, reads an American book; little did he suspect that less than two hundred years later the answer in literate quarters would be just about everyone. Indeed, just a few years after Smith posed his inflammatory question, the American writer Samuel Knapp would begin to assemble one of the first histories of American literature as part of a lecture series that he was giving. The course materials offered by American Passages continue in the tradition begun by Knapp in 1829. One goal of this Study Guide is to help you learn to be a literary historian; that is, to introduce you to American literature as it has evolved over time and to stimulate you to make connections between and among texts. Like a literary historian, when you make these connections you are telling a story; the story of how American literature came into being. This Overview outlines four paths by which you can narrate the story of American literature; one

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based on literary movements and historical change, one based on the American Passages Overview Questions, one based on Contexts, and one based on multiculturalism.

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