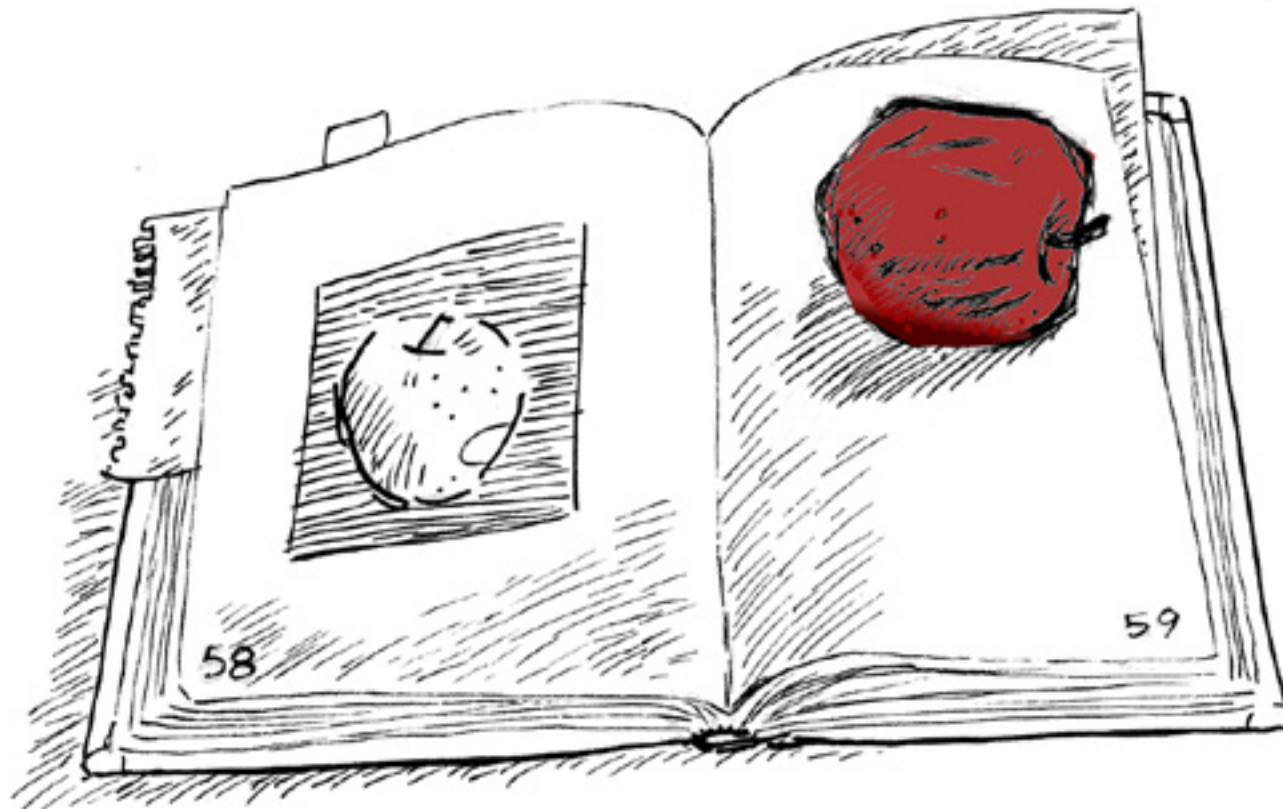# Early American Literature

introduction

Primary focus in this class:

- In depth examination of what is termed early American literature.
- Readings will show different aspects of the past literary canon

   plus supplements from other cultures.

Items to Consider

   When does "American" Literature begin?

   What does the term "American" mean to the early settlers?

   How many diverse cultures composed the overall "American" culture?

Early Explorers of New World, before 1492

YEAR	FROM	TO	EVIDENCE
70,000 ? B.C. – 12,000 B.C.	Siberia	Alaska	The survivors peopled the Americas.
6,000? B.C. – 1,500? B.C.	Indonesia	South America	Similarities in blowguns, papermaking, etc.
5000? B.C.	Japan	Ecuador	Similar pottery, fishing styles.
10,000? B.C.–600? B.C.	Siberia	Alaska	Continuing contact by Inuits across Bering Sea.
1000 B.C. – A.D. 300	Afro-Phoenicia	Central America	Negroid and Caucasoid likenesses in sculpture and ceramics, Arab history, etc.
A.D. 600	Ireland, via Iceland	Newfoundland? West Indies?	Legends of St. Brendan, written c. A.D. 850, confirmed by Norse sagas.
1000-1350	Greenland, Iceland	Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, Cape Cod, and further south	Oral sagas, confirmed by archeology on Newfound-land
1304? – 1424?	Polynesia	Chile	Chicken bones precede Spanish; similar fishhooks.

based on material:
Loewen, James W. *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*. New York: Touchstone, 2007. Print.

introduction

Reviewing past historical writings acts as a clarification of our society—it explains our past diversity as humans and enables different ideas to be traded between various people and current cultures.

Historical Critical Analysis

Examining past literature:

- helps us comprehend the creative process of an individual author

  or group of authors within their time frame

- shows the understanding we have of a specific culture, within its time frame

- explains how one culture interacts with other cultures

- shows possible (dis)connection between an author and the culture

  he/she lived in

- develops new literature for the current generation

Historical Critical Analysis

Concepts from English 1302 that Apply:

There are three levels of literary appraisals.

• **Paraphrase**: helps clarify the meaning of the work when you quickly write out the intentions of the story or poem in your own words. This is a good technique as well to use after reading a story to make sure you understand the author's strategies. However, use it carefully. A full story should only be paraphrased into two sentences for a critical research paper.

• **Explicate**: you deconstruct the work scene by scene, analyzing each set of images and word choice. You check for symbols, characters, narrator, and tones. Decide how these factor together. Best used for poetry and examination of songs.

Historical Critical Analysis

• With a **critical analysis** you delve deeper into the text through the explication process. You focus on a specific image or word or symbol or event and then compare it to the meaning of the entire work as a whole.

For example:

To use E. A. Poe's "Cask of Amontillado" the word impunity is used frequently throughout the piece. Does this imply the main character Montresor is trying to convince himself that he has no feelings of remorse for getting away with his crime? Since the setting of the story is assumed to be Italy or France, what is Poe saying about the past European cultural landscape versus the "present" American culture?

Historical Critical Analysis

from the college textbook *Portable Legacies*:

The *historical, social,* or *cultural analysis essay* involves a study of how the work reveals historical, social, or cultural realities or trends. In this essay, you concentrate on how the work mirrors, comments on, or critiques particular historical, social, or cultural phenomena [...] In historical, social, or cultural analyses, your reading would extend beyond the text to encompass the author's biography, letters, or autobiography; historical background information; and other texts of the time, such as advertisements, documents, historical tracts, or other cultural artifacts (45).

Critical Analysis papers

Literary Analysis uses both persuasive and argumentative purposes:

- papers must show a clear, concise thesis statement

- papers must defend the thesis utilizing evidence from primary source

  > the story itself is primary source

  > critical, outside opinions (research) are secondary source

- Always use present tense when discussing the action within a story or poem—
  even if the action is related to you by a narrator in past tense, you always use
  present tense when discussing action in a story in your paper

- When referring to a past author use present tense, even if the writer is
  deceased.

ex: Homer traditionally invokes a muse at the beginning of his epic The Odyssey.

Critical Analysis Papers

As well, whenever describing action in the text, or paraphrasing the text, use present tense, even if the information is told you in past tense.

ex:

The scarlet letter is a punishment placed upon Hester's breast by the community and yet it is an extremely imaginative product of Hester's own needlework.

You should read the assigned material *three* times.

First Reading

The first reading acts on an emotional level.

Concentrate on the actions of characters and basic plot.

Read first for enjoyment, without interruption

1. notice the use of language and word play

2. consider the actions of the characters

3. note the setting and the atmosphere of the scene

Afterwards, as soon as possible, determine the impact

1. Do you have any unanswered questions?

2. Did you like the story?

3. Did you relate to any of the characters?

Second Reading

The second reading acts on an analytical level.

Resolves unanswered questions from first reading.

- Material you may have missed can be explored in better detail.

Concentrate on the plot details:

1. to answer any possible questions

2. to confirm what you already know

Determine:

1. theme

2. conflict type

3. How do these elements affect the developments and actions of the characters?

Third Reading

The third reading specifically targets a higher level of critical analysis.

Since you can predict what will happen, you can analyze in closer details why characters act or react in the manner they do.

• Newer insights can be gained regarding the author's strategy.

• Hidden symbols are easier to recognize.

• You can determine influences and inspirations for the author.

Furthermore it is important to be open to the entire work.

1. consider how it relates to other readings

2. discover what sets it apart from other writings

Third Reading

Ask yourself:

1. What images are used in the story?

2. What literary devices are used in the story?

3. Is this an analogy?

4. What is the author's main goal for telling me this story?

5. Who do the characters resemble? What symbolic images are used?

6. Ask yourself: where have I seen this situation before?

7. What inspirations or obvious emulations did the author use?

Guidelines for Reading

What is important about item six:

- Literature grows out of other literature. This is nothing new.

- No idea is original— nothing is original in the creative process; borrowing from other established authors is frequent, subconsciously and consciously.

   intertextuality: the reinvention, insertion of situations and conflicts in a new sequence of thought to present a new idea; creation of something new out of an older concept.

- *With a third reading, it is easier to spot intertextuality.*

Intertextuality

The Top Four Writings which are referenced, reworked, reinvented :

1. Biblical stories

2. Shakespearean plays

3. Greek/Roman myths

4. Fairy tales

Look for these emulations; they establish mood, atmosphere, scenery, and theme — consciously and subconsciously.

Review of Reading Points

• The first reading acts on an *emotional level.*

• The second reading acts on an *analytical level.*

• The third reading targets a *higher level of critical analysis.*