

INTRODUCTION

A Study Guide for American Literature to 1900 is to be used in conjunction with the textbook *American Literature to 1900*,¹ and is intended to make this subject more accessible. Although the textbook is described as a self-contained course, this Guide offers the following additional resources:

1. Extensive complementary material, which is arranged in the order of the 24 units of the course and structured into four sections within each unit:
 - 1) “Learning objectives,” where the main goals of every unit are clearly stated;
 - 2) “Suggestions for how to proceed,” with more detailed practical advice about how to approach every unit;
 - 3) an “Activity” which is aimed at encouraging productive responses to the literary texts of the unit;
 - 4) a “Bibliography” of selected primary and secondary sources on each author, expanding and updating the general bibliography contained in pages 491-97 of the textbook.
2. A collection of 20 “Sample exams,” followed by a key to assist students in the identification of the authors and texts included in the first part of each exam.
3. A “Glossary” with a list of terms which are central to the study of literature in general and of American literature in particular. Most of these terms are defined in *American Literature to 1900*, where they appear highlighted in boldface type when first used. Here, they are presented in alphabetical order to facilitate quick reference, and in most cases they are explained in more detail than in the textbook.

This Guide as a whole is designed to help students become better readers of literature, and to equip them with tools for writing about it. In order to achieve this double purpose, they must learn the principles underlying systems

¹ Teresa Gibert, *American Literature to 1900* (Madrid: Editorial universitaria Ramón Areces, 2004, 500 pages). ISBN: 84-8004-487-X. The first edition was published in 2 volumes in 2001.

of analysis, and acquire, develop or improve the critical skills which are necessary in the interpretation of literary texts. Understanding literature enhances its enjoyment, but the appreciation of literature is only a first step in the pathway of studying it as an academic subject. The other steps to follow include developing the ability to express informed judgments and convincing assertions, being aware that some arguments may seem less plausible than others and, therefore, that diverse views will not be valued equally when submitted to evaluation. Indeed, the fact that in literary analysis there is often no single right answer does not mean that any opinion may be valid. It is certainly possible to approach literary texts in a variety of ways, and the Guide will furnish a frame of reference for examining the selections of the course so as to provide insight into them, taking into account that different people respond differently to the same text, because readers are influenced by the values, assumptions and expectations they bring to it from their previous readings, educational background and life experiences.

The activities outlined in this Guide implement a highly practical reader-oriented approach to literature suitable for individuals working alone, although they can also be done in groups. A personal response to each text will always be elicited from you as a starting point in the process which will lead you from spontaneous reflection to the more formal tasks of literary interpretation. The questioning strategy of the Guide is meant to stimulate you to think critically, by exploring options and subsequently raising your own questions, and to assist you in the gathering of evidence to support your conclusions. Record your observations and reactions to the texts, keeping in mind that reading responsively is a hard pursuit which will turn you into an active participant in the process of creating meaning. Nevertheless, if you find that the Guide is too demanding, remember that you are not expected to complete all of the written assignments recommended here, but may choose to devote more time and energy to what you find most compelling or provocative. And if you feel prompted to go beyond the scope of the Guide itself, in search of other literary texts which appeal to you, do not hesitate to satisfy your interest, for it will be the best proof that you have taken full advantage of this book.