

## PREFACE

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*American Literature to 1900* is a self-contained survey course primarily addressed to university students enrolled in distance education programmes. It can also be of interest for those who want to enjoy the advantages of a systematic approach to the subject but are unwilling or unable to register in such programmes. Both kinds of learners need a comprehensive course especially designed for self-instruction, rather than an anthology to be used in class or a traditional textbook on the literary history of the United States written to supplement lectures. What they need specifically is a series of integrated study units which provide a suitable alternative to the standard classroom procedures of learning under the direct control of a teacher.

Over thirty years of full-time teaching experience at the National University of Distance Education (UNED) have enabled the author of this course not only to become aware of the main difficulties that any distance education student currently encounters, but also to find ways to overcome them. From this perspective, it would be unrealistic to assume that, since there is a wealth of resources on American literature, most students at an initial stage will be in a position to start gathering and selecting disparate pieces of information so as to build up their own learning materials autonomously. This task would be too intimidating for some and too time-consuming for all. On the other hand, once they have been introduced to the field of American literature, they will be well equipped to undertake their own research by extracting relevant information from books and journals and from the profusion of Web pages available on the Internet. It is also expected that the samples of literary works offered throughout the course will encourage further reading.

The aims of this course are to help students to:

- survey American literary movements from the early colonial period to the end of the nineteenth century, focusing on the works of twenty-four authors
- approach the reading experience as an enjoyable and enriching creative process which involves the development of strategies to think critically about literature
- acquire a thorough grounding in the basics of textual and contextual analysis by the application of various critical methods
- develop the language skills necessary to read and discuss literary works
- show a genuine understanding and appreciation of literature through the articulation of personal responses
- develop the ability to explore the authors' intended meanings, which may differ from each reader's subjective interpretation of their texts
- be aware of other interpretive possibilities besides the significance that a work has for a particular reader
- learn about the multiple perspectives from which different schools of criticism analyse literary texts.

Since it would be impossible to cover the entire literary production of three centuries, twenty-four authors have been carefully chosen along the following guidelines:

- Only those who wrote in English have been included, in spite of the fact that nowadays many courses in American literature incorporate texts originally composed in other languages from any territory that is now a part of the United States of America.
- In the case of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, four authors have been selected for each one; the other sixteen belong to the nineteenth century, which is a much richer period from a literary point of view.
- The authors are usually presented in chronological order by date of birth. There is a pedagogical reason whenever there is an exception to this general rule. For instance, Thoreau immediately follows Emerson because of the affinity of their work and their close personal relationship, though other authors in our course were born in the fourteen years that elapsed between their birth dates.
- The fact that each unit is organized around one individual author does not imply that literary trends are being ignored or undervalued. For example, Anne Bradstreet has been chosen to exemplify seventeenth-century poetry (since Edward Taylor's poetry was considered too

difficult for an introductory course); Mary Rowlandson stands out as the most significant representative of the captivity narrative genre, and Olaudah Equiano is a pioneer figure of the early slave narrative genre.

- Although it is no longer so clear who the “major” writers are, or what entitles us to call them “major” and distinguish them from “minor” ones, all the authors who enjoy a widely acknowledged prominent position have been included.
- The new expanded and expanding American canon is reflected in the selection of writers such as Phillis Wheatley, who has only recently been recognized as an important poet.

The study units have basically the same structure although they may vary in length; the shorter extracts illustrate the works of more difficult writers, whereas the longer excerpts tend to be easier to interpret. Thus, the number of pages is not invariably indicative of the amount of time and effort to be devoted to a particular unit. The extension of Unit 3 is due to the fact that it provides an introduction to the basic elements of poetry which are necessary to approach not only Anne Bradstreet’s work but also that of all the poets included in the course.

Each unit is divided into four parts:

1. The first part places the individual authors in their biographical and historical contexts, taking into account political, religious, and social aspects.
2. Then follows a text, in verse or in prose, which may be a full-length work (a poem or a short story) or passages from a longer narrative or a novel. Each text has been edited bearing in mind an audience of non-native English speaking students. The footnotes define uncommon words, identify sources, elucidate references, or clarify allusions. Poetry must be kept in its original form, but seventeenth-century prose has been modernized in spelling and punctuation. A good procedure to tackle a text is to skim it in order to get a general idea of its content and then reread it carefully, paying special attention to the footnotes.
3. The questions for self-evaluation focus on close readings of the selected texts. Some answers only require the identification of figures of speech or specific details within the text whereas others demand a general understanding of the whole. A key to the multiple choice questions is provided at the end of the volume.
4. The exploratory questions constitute an essential part of each unit and are meant to be thought-provoking. Apart from emphasizing the formal qualities of the text itself, such questions call for an application of

various critical methods which bring to the text a rich diversity of perspectives. The exploratory questions contain additional information about the authors and their works, often in relation to other writers in the course in order to encourage comparison and contrast among them. Furthermore, this last section offers definitions of literary terms, which are highlighted in bold letters because the words in **boldface** tend to attract attention and are easier to memorize. This specific vocabulary is presented gradually, and always in context, so as to lead students to put theory into practice by applying these terms immediately to the texts they are analysing. Since glossaries of literary terms are easily available both in printed form and via Internet, the inclusion of one more glossary at the end of the course was not considered necessary.

The four parts which comprise each study unit are sometimes supplemented with highlighted sections containing practical advice about specific learning techniques, such as the following example:

Here are some suggestions to help you develop your study skills:

- Study regularly. Setting up a regular time schedule in a location where you will not be disturbed will make up for the discipline of attending classes.
- Take notes in the ways that suit you best. Some people prefer notebooks, whereas others prefer loose sheets of paper. Some write in complete sentences, and others jot down key words. Outlines, charts and diagrams may also help to organize information.
- Organize your study materials: reference books (including good dictionaries), notebooks, and folders.
- Annotate your own copy of the book, marking anything that makes you react to the text.

This textbook is to be used in conjunction with *A Study Guide for American Literature to 1900*,<sup>1</sup> which offers extensive complementary material (including activities aimed at encouraging productive responses to the literary texts of each unit), a collection of 20 sample exams, and a glossary with a list of terms which are central to the study of literature in general and of American literature in particular.

<sup>1</sup> Teresa Gibert, *A Study Guide for American Literature to 1900* (Madrid: Editorial universitaria Ramón Areces, 2009, 218 pages). ISBN: 978-84-8004-748-7.