

3) The use of science and empirical evidence to explain the world was debated over during the early part of US history, creating much conflict. Cotton Mather's texts were written with a specific agenda in mind, that is, to mask superstition and supernatural beliefs with pseudo-scientific evidence, thus making it ever more difficult for others to criticize the actions of the Salem Witch Trials. This denial of scientific or empirical evidence for superstitious or religious purposes was extremely prevalent during this time, though not a universal truth. Thomas Jefferson's texts use a more scientific approach to deny the claims made by Buffon based on superstition or prejudice, that is, that all creatures from the "New World" are inferior to creatures from Europe. Edgar Allen Poe used a mixture of science and superstition to create a more realistic world in his stories. These examples show the differing sides of this conflict; Mather represents more fundamentalist beliefs while Jefferson represents what some may call the more "educated" or "modern" beliefs. Poe represents a common standpoint that many artists have taken during similar conflicts, that of combining the differing beliefs in their work. Though this particular conflict is seen by many to be resolved, its presence is still felt today, and most likely will be felt for as long as people are free to believe what they want.

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6) A common assumption about social life during the early period of US history is that “romantic love” was something of a commodity, that it was not a usual occurrence. After reading several texts from this period, it becomes clear that this is not true, that, in fact, “romantic love” was just as common as it is today, and though there are many similarities between today’s idea of “romantic love” and that of this earlier time, it was also seen through a slightly different lens. Emily Dickinson portrayed well the double standard in societal views about love and also the conundrum that many women found themselves in at this time. As Dickinson describes it, women were not supposed to feel lust or desire, and were certainly not supposed to act on these feelings. She used love as an inspiration for many of her poems, describing the passionate and painful aspects of love. Like Dickinson, Walt Whitman also used love as a source of inspiration and spoke of its wondrous nature. He also brought up the pain, suffering, and humiliation that often accompany feelings of love and lust. Edgar Allen Poe also discussed “romantic love,” though he had a very gothic view of it. To Poe, “romantic love” is fleeting and unrequited, only leading to heartbreak and often times tragedy. The personal experiences of these authors, like any artist, influenced their views of love. All of Poe’s loves died of tuberculosis, Dickinson had to hide her romantic escapades, and Whitman’s sexual preferences forced him into the shadows.

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7) Art has been used to bring about social change in almost all modern societies, and early US literature is no exception. Herman Melville's stories are a good example of this. They become allegorical once seen from the right viewpoint, which works extremely well in religious circles, but is also effective in most other social groups. His text is especially masterful in that those who do not wish to see the critique will only see an endorsement of their ideas. Along the same lines, Anne Bradstreet's poems are a good vehicle for social critiques in that poems can easily be used to mask truths and to sneak ideas that would be seen as breeding dissension into people's homes. Bradstreet's message is simple and similar to other female writers, that is, that women are capable of gaining intelligence and expressing that intelligence through writing without disrupting the entire social structure of their community. Ralph Waldo Emerson's essays could be seen as fodder for this fire; he advocates for faith in one's self and one's own thoughts. Emerson brings the point that art has no higher purpose than to teach people to be confident in their own ideas and to rely on themselves. Emerson uses essays, I believe, due to their inherent ease of communication; it is extremely simple to get ideas across in an essay due to their capability for bluntness and straightforward speech.

8) Reading translations of foreign texts or oral traditions as well as transcriptions of speeches is an important part of understanding the basis for many works of "true" literature. This is especially true with early US

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literature, because so much of it is influenced by American Indian oral traditions as well as the speeches made by prominent US citizens at the time. After reading the American Indian stories of the “Changing Woman and the Hero Twins” and “The Bungling Host,” we are able to get a better idea of just how universal some of our most common and most beloved character archetypes really are. The transcriptions we read of Sojourner Truth’s speeches are a good example of how speeches are important for cultural background for other texts and give us a better idea of the state of society at the time. Though these texts are important, I do not believe they should be taught as singular works of literature, but instead should be used to glean a better understanding of works of “true” literature. Part of this stems from the inherent problems with these texts, that of error in translation, biasing in transcription, or alteration in some other way. Some words, especially in American Indian and other non-western languages, do not translate into English, or have different inferential meanings in their natural language than they do in English. To this point, the meaning a speaker has for a certain phrase may be different from that of their audience or the person transcribing their speech, not to mention the personal ideas of the transcriber leaking into the speaker’s words.

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- 9) The US has also been greatly linked with the landscape, and the American Identity has been considered to be almost solely shaped by it. Alvar Nùñez

Cabeza de Vaca is an example that many point to as evidence for the power of the American landscape. de Vaca himself hints at the fact that the landscape he found himself lost in transformed him from a Spaniard into a Native.

Based on his writings, it can be argued that the soul of the American Identity lies in the wild. Unlike de Vaca, William Bradford, and those like him, saw the wild as something savage and uncultured that needed to be mastered and civilized. Being a man from one of the very European towns that first dotted the eastern coast of the US, it is not surprising that Bradford felt this way.

One piece of evidence that it was his highly European society that influenced his views of the wild is how once the colonies had been established and had been on their own, people began to see the wild differently. By the time Henry David Thoreau published his work, the American landscape had taken on a wholly different identity. Thoreau deeply believed that the wild is what provides man with inspiration and a reason and means to live. Without indulging in the natural urge to be surrounded by nature, Thoreau felt that man would lose his identity and become soulless automatons.

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- 10) During the early part of US history, women were not encouraged, and were in fact admonished from writing. In spite of this, there are many prominent female writers that are now recognized for their skill. Sor Juana Inès de la Cruz was a poet who advocated for the intelligence and wit of women and how they were perfectly capable of writing great works. She used her biting

wit and brazen attitude toward sexism to stir up as much controversy and talk in general as she could. Like Sor Juana, Emily Dickinson believed strongly that women can and should write, but found the expectations of society for women made it impossible for women to write while fulfilling their societal duties. Through her actions, she advocated for women to deny society's expectations and rules and write. Obviously, the common theme throughout all movements for equality is that the oppressed are just as good as the oppressors. Sojourner Truth's speeches were rife with this idea. She brashly and, at times, crudely pushed the message that women were just as strong and intelligent as men were. She stirred up controversy and thrived on it, using the gossip about her to spread her message.

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