

MA Exam Themes

American Literature

Fiction

19th versus the 20th century in fiction

How did fiction develop in the 19th century as opposed to the 20th?

What social and creative forces drove the similarities and differences between the centuries?

Nathaniel Hawthorne's influence on American fiction

Who was Nathaniel Hawthorne? What are his major works?

What influence did Hawthorne's fiction have on writers that came after him?

Modernist American fiction

What is modernism? What is fiction?

What are the main works of American fiction in the modernist period (1914 to 1945)?

How were American modernist works similar or different from each other?

Millennial American fiction

How did American fiction change from the late 20th century to the early 21st century?

What social forces influenced fiction around the turn of the 21st century in the U.S.

Is the turn of the 21st century during the "postmodern" period in American literature? Why or why not?

Regionalism and local color in American fiction

What is "local color" and/or "regionalism" in literature?

In what ways is regionalist and local-color writing specific in America?

Unreliable narrator in American fiction

What is an "unreliable narrator"?

What is the function of the "unreliable narrator" in American fiction?

Development of short story

How is a short story defined in comparison with other genres?

How has the modern short story developed since its beginning in the 19th century?

The road novel

What is a "road novel"?

How can the "on-the-road" novel be seen as typically American?

Historical novel

What is a "historical novel"?

Why is the genre of historical novel (historical romance) important in America?

Southern Gothic

What is "Southern Gothic"?

Why did Southern Gothic come out of the American South? Was the use of the Gothic purposeful?

The American Novel

How is a novel defined?

Does the novel develop in a particular way in the United States?

Nature in American novel

How is "nature" defined when it is used in literature? How do you know when a writer refers to "nature"?

What role does nature play in American fiction?

Experiment in 20th century American fiction

What does it mean to "experiment" in fiction? How can you tell a story is "experimental"?

What experimental approaches can be found in 20th century American fiction?

Poetry

19th versus the 20th century in poetry

What are the main continuities in the development of American poetry?

Who were the major lasting influences and why?

How has poetry changed in the course of the two centuries?

Romanticism in American poetry

How did Romanticism develop in America? What is the relationship between American and European Romanticism? How has Romanticism influenced modern poetry in America?

Modernist poetry and after

What are the main characteristics of modernist poetry? How does American modernist poetry relate to European modernism?

Who are the major American modernist poets and how did they influence later development of American poetry? What were the reactions to modernism in the following generations of poets?

The role of the poet in American poetry

What aspects of the role of the poet can be examined in the study of poetry?

How has the role of the poet changed in the history of American poetry?

Walt Whitman's influence on 20th century poetry

Who was Walt Whitman? What are his major works?

In what ways has Walt Whitman influence 20th century poetry?

Free verse in American poetry.

What is free verse, when and why did it develop?

What role has free verse played in American poetry?

Experiment in 20th century American poetry

What does it mean to "experiment" in poetry? How can you tell a poem is "experimental"?

What experimental approaches can be found in 20th century American poetry?

Nature in American poetry

How has American nature been seen by the poets?

What role does nature play in American poetry?

Drama

Drama in America

How did drama develop in the U.S.?

How is the development of drama different in the U.S. as compared to Europe?

What are the main dramatic works to consider in the 20th century? When were most of them produced? Why were they produced at this time?

Not genre-specific

Puritan heritage

What is the Puritan heritage in U.S. history and culture?

Is the Puritan heritage relevant in the 19th and 20th century literature in America?

American identity in literature

What concerns about national identity have existed in America and why?

How has American literature dealt with the concept of American identity?

Native American themes in American literature

Who were and are “Native Americans” or “American Indians”?

How has the representation of Native American themes changed in the course of the history of American literature?

Women's literature

Is there “women's literature”?

Why would it be important to study “women’s literature” specifically in contrast to other literature?

Development of African-American literature

What are the major issues in the development of African-American literature?

Individualism and self-reliance

How has American literature treated the concepts of “individualism” and “self-reliance”?

Why are these concepts important specifically to American literature?

The idea of democracy in American literature

How has the idea of democracy been reflected in American literature?

Why is democracy particularly important to the American experience and literature?

America as a utopia

What is a “utopia”?

How have the utopian visions of America affected American writings? How is the utopian thinking present in modern literature?

Transcendentalism and its influence on modern literature

What is transcendentalism?

Is transcendentalism a crucial influence on modern literature?

The concept of innocence in American literature

What is the concept of innocence?

What role has the concept of innocence played in American literature?

Relationship between American and British literature

What are the similarities and differences between “American” and “British” literature?

How has the relationship between American and British literature developed throughout centuries?

Immigrant literature

What has the situation of immigrant literature in America been?

Why and how is the literature coming from the immigrant experience important in America?

The American Dream in 20th century literature

What is the “American Dream”?

Is the American Dream still relevant to 20th century literature?

Secularism in American literature

What does it mean for something to be “secular”?

In what ways is the “separation of church and state” reflected in American literature?

How do the competing notions of the importance of Puritan principles and the importance of a secular government play out in American literature?

The frontier in American literature

What is “the frontier” in the American context?

In what ways is the frontier an important principle for American literature, now and in the past?

Revived writers

What does it mean for a writer to be “revived”?

Which American writers are more famous after their death than before? Why do they get “revived”? What differences are there among revived writers?

Influence of postmodern theory

What are the basic concepts related to postmodern literary theory?

How and why were postmodern American literature and literary theory linked?

Meritocracy in 20th century literature

What is “meritocracy”?

How is the American ideal of meritocracy criticized in American literature of the 20th century? When during the century was this a more common concern and why?

American literature in the globalized world

Do national boundaries on literatures become more or less relevant from the last 20th century?

What is particularly “American” about American literature in the late 20th century, when western cultures become more homogenized and perhaps the U.S. has an undue influence on other cultures?