

Emerging Realism: Historical Context

KEY IDEAS The central influence on literature of this period was the conflict between North and South that ended in the Civil War. Although romantic attitudes helped push the nation into war, four years of bitter fighting led to a new realism.

A Cultural Divide

“A house divided against itself cannot stand,” wrote **Abraham Lincoln** in 1858, referring to the bitterly divided United States. Since colonial times, the South and the North had shown strong regional differences. Most of the manufacturing and financial services of the nation were located in the North, whose economy was based primarily on trade and industry. In contrast, the South had developed an agricultural way of life—growing cotton, tobacco, and sugar cane for export to the North and Europe—that relied on the labor of nearly four million slaves. Most Southerners opposed any interference with slavery by the federal government because of the region’s economic dependence on it, the widespread fear of slave unrest, and the belief that states should control their own affairs.

SLAVERY DIVIDES THE NATION Although national political leaders tried to sidestep the slavery issue, growing Northern opposition to slavery and its expansion into the West made confrontation inevitable. In the 1850s, several events moved the country to its breaking point. In Kansas, the vote over whether to join the Union as a free state or a slave state turned deadly when gun-toting mobs swarmed over the border from Missouri to cast illegal ballots in favor of slavery. Continuing violence between proslavery and antislavery settlers led people to begin calling the territory **Bleeding Kansas**. Abolitionist **John Brown** played a role in Bleeding Kansas in 1856, killing five proslavery men as revenge for the sacking of the antislavery town of Lawrence. Three years later, Brown again shocked the nation when he led a bloody raid on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, hoping to spark a slave uprising. Writer **Henry David Thoreau** called Brown “an angel of light”; but fellow writer **Nathaniel Hawthorne** retorted, “No man was ever more justly hanged.”

CONFLICT REACHES THE GOVERNMENT Even the floor of the U.S. Senate became a battleground. In 1856, Massachusetts senator Charles Sumner gave an impassioned speech against slavery, berating his colleagues for two days for their support of slavery. A few days later, Carolina congressman Preston S. Brooks retaliated by attacking Sumner with his cane, beating the Massachusetts senator unconscious. When writer **William Cullen Bryant** heard about the caning, he was outraged. “Has it come to this,” he asked in the *New York Evening Post*, “that we must speak with bated breath in the presence of our Southern masters? . . . Are we, too, slaves, slaves for life, a



SUNSHINE STATE STANDARDS

Literary Analysis

Benchmark LA.1112.2.1.8 Explain how ideas, values, and themes of a literary work often reflect the historical period in which it was written.

Benchmark LA.1112.2.2.3 Organize information to show understanding or relationships. . . .

TAKING NOTES

Outlining As you read this introduction, use an outline to record main ideas about the historical characteristics and literature of this period. You can use headings, boldfaced terms, and the information in boxes like this one as starting points. (See page R49 in the *Research Handbook* for more help with outlining.)

1. Historical Context

A. Cultural Divide

1. Northern economy based on trade and industry, Southern based on agriculture and slavery
2. slavery’s expansion west provoked confrontation



ADDITIONAL BACKGROUND

For more on the Civil War era, visit [The Literature Center at ClassZone.com](http://TheLiteratureCenter.com).

target for their brutal blows, when we do not comport ourselves to please them?" Meanwhile, newspapers across the South applauded the attack, describing abolitionists as unruly dogs to be collared and disciplined. Such angry name-calling and accusations reflected—and added to—the growing sense on both sides that Northerners and Southerners were no longer simply Americans from different regions, but foreigners and enemies.

In 1857, the Supreme Court entered the fray by hearing the case of **Dred Scott**, a slave whose owner had taken him to spend several years in a free state. Scott argued that living in a free state made him free; the Supreme Court ruled against him. Worse, it went on to say that even free blacks “had no rights which a white man was bound to respect.” The *Dred Scott* decision sent shock waves through the already divided nation. Northerners were outraged and alarmed. Was the South’s “peculiar institution” of slavery to become the law of the whole land?



An 1856 cartoon of Congressman Preston S. Brooks attacking Senator Charles Sumner on the Senate floor.

The Civil War

Ironically, none of these acts led to the final break. Instead, the lawful election in 1860 of a politically moderate U.S. president, Abraham Lincoln ignited war. Enraged at Lincoln’s pledge to stop the western spread of slavery, the Southern states seceded to form the **Confederate States of America**.

For a generation that had grown up on the literary ideal of the brave, dashing **Romantic hero**, the booming of Confederate cannons firing on Fort Sumter in the spring of 1861 was a call to glory. Boys and young men rushed off to join the Union or Confederate army. Southerners boasted that a single one of them could lick ten Yankees; Northerners were sure that “Johnny Reb” would turn and run at the first shot. For many, the biggest fear was that the war would end too soon and they would miss their chance to become heroes.

The mood was nearly festive on the sunny July day when fresh Union forces marched south into Virginia to confront the rebels at Bull Run. Soldiers wandered from their lines to pick blackberries and drink cool water from the creek, and the cream of Washington society drove down in carriages with bottles of champagne and picnic baskets to enjoy the spectacle.

REALITY STRIKES By late afternoon, thousands of dead and wounded soldiers lay near the banks of Bull Run. On the losing side, panic-stricken Union soldiers stumbled away from the battlefield, their feet tangling in shawls and parasols that had been dropped by terrified civilians as they fled. The party was over.

A Voice from the Times

Future years will never know the seething hell and the black infernal background of countless minor scenes and interiors, (not the official surface courtesousness of the Generals, not the few great battles) . . . the real war will never get in the books.

—Walt Whitman

The blood-soaked **Battle of Bull Run** gave everyone (especially the losing Union side) a taste of the reality of war, but it was only the beginning. Four long years of fighting followed. Names of battle sites became synonymous with death: Shiloh, Antietam, Fredericksburg, Gettysburg, Vicksburg. When the war ended at last, in April 1865, with **General Robert E. Lee's** surrender to **General Ulysses S. Grant** at Appomattox Courthouse, approximately 618,000 men had died—nearly as many as have died in all other wars that the United States has ever fought. Much of the South lay in ruins, scarred by gutted plantation houses, burned bridges, and uprooted railroad lines.

Ideas of the Age

KEY IDEAS Americans in the postwar period embraced notions of freedom and unity. At the same time, they lost their taste for romanticism, having been confronted with the harsh realities of war.

Freedom and Unity

The United States was changed by the Civil War. It had suffered bitterly and was now a wiser, more somber nation. Yet the ideals of America's founders had survived the devastation of war. For the first time, the Declaration of Independence's notions of equality and liberty for all were brought closer to fruition. Slavery was dead—outlawed by Lincoln's bold **Emancipation Proclamation** and the **Thirteenth Amendment** to the Constitution. "We shout for joy that we live to record this righteous decree," said **Frederick Douglass**. "Free Forever!"

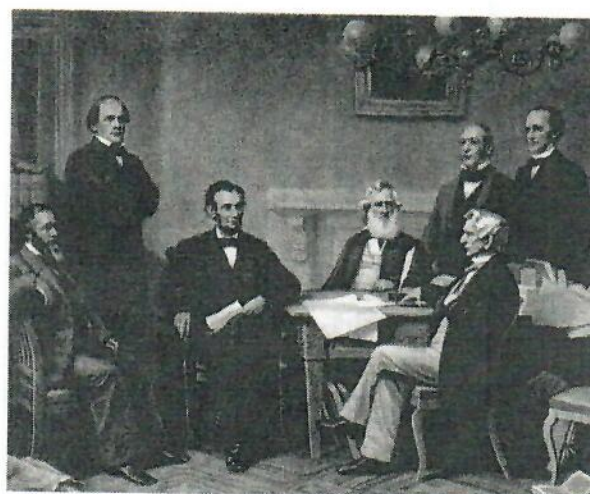
The Civil War had divided the country; its end brought the country back together. This time the country was united in a new way. Before the war, people were used to saying "The United States *are* . . .," with the emphasis on the individual states more than on the united interests of all. After the war, people began saying "The United States *is* . . ." A group of independent states had become one nation, indivisible, with the goal of liberty for all.

The Civil War changed not only American society but its literary culture as well. In the years following the war, American readers and writers found they had lost their taste for romanticism. Many had witnessed war's grim nature firsthand, and it shaped their view of life. Gallant heroism and adventure no longer suited America's tastes; nor did meditations on the beauty of nature or the worth of the individual. Writing became more honest, unsentimental, and ironic. A new style, **realism**, would predominate in the years to come.

A Voice from the Times

[W]e here highly resolve that these dead shall not have fought in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

—Abraham Lincoln



Abraham Lincoln Reading the Emancipation Proclamation Before His Cabinet Members, undated color illustration after painting by Francis Bicknell Carpenter. © Bettmann/Corbis.

Literature of the Times

KEY IDEAS The Civil War was a transitional period for writers of the day. Groundbreaking poets, former slaves, famous public figures and everyday people all contributed their ideas as the country and its literature moved from romanticism to realism.

Brilliant Mavericks: Whitman and Dickinson

In 1842, when the conflicts leading to the Civil War were just beginning to brew and the romantic movement was going strong, writer **Ralph Waldo Emerson** issued a challenge to America. The nation needed a poet worthy of itself—a truly fresh voice with limitless passion and originality. “I look in vain,” lamented Emerson, “for the poet whom I describe. We do not with sufficient plainness, or sufficient profoundness, address ourselves to life. . . .” In the coming decades, two poets would answer Emerson’s bold call: **Walt Whitman** and **Emily Dickinson**.

Outwardly, Whitman and Dickinson had little in common. Whitman, big, bearded, and outspoken, was always in the thick of things and wrote many poems about current issues and events, from the sad plight of the slave to the shocking assassination of President Lincoln. Dickinson, on the other hand, was shy and reclusive, living her whole life in her native New England, and finding inspiration for her poetry in her own thoughts.

RULE-BREAKERS The two, however, were not entirely unlike. Both felt hemmed in by conventional ideas of how poems ought to look and what poems ought to say. Both wrote poetry so radical in form and content that it took many years for readers to appreciate it. (In Dickinson’s case, appreciation didn’t come until after her death.) Together, they broke poetry wide open, creating the most remarkable work of the Civil War era.

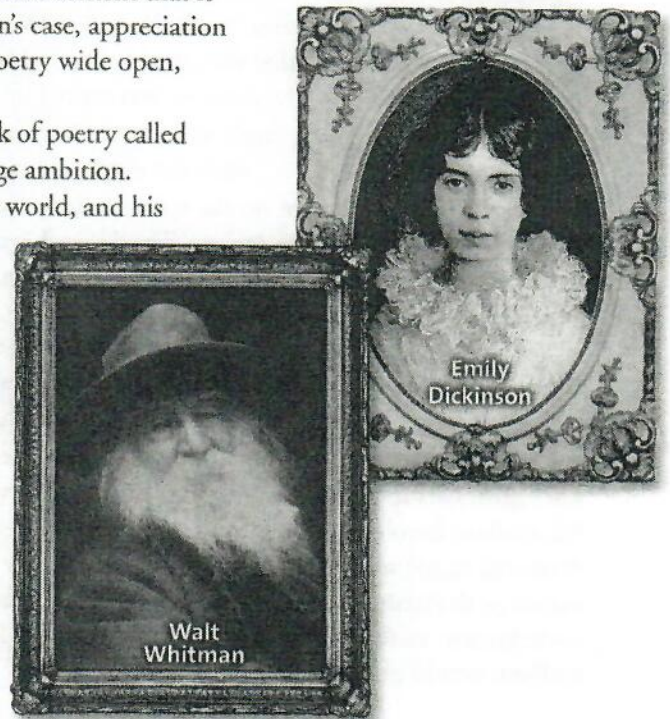
In 1855, Whitman published at his own expense a book of poetry called *Leaves of Grass*. The book was small, but it contained a huge ambition. Whitman saw America as a great poem, the greatest in the world, and his job was to capture it on paper. A sprawling, rowdy, vigorous young nation, he believed, could not be squeezed into traditional poetic forms. Instead, he wrote in **free verse**, unconfined by formal patterns of rhyme and meter. His lines were loose and rambling, his language colorful and vigorous, and he refused to limit himself to “poetic” subjects. If it was a part of American life, it was his to write about, even if it was a topic others might consider common or vulgar.

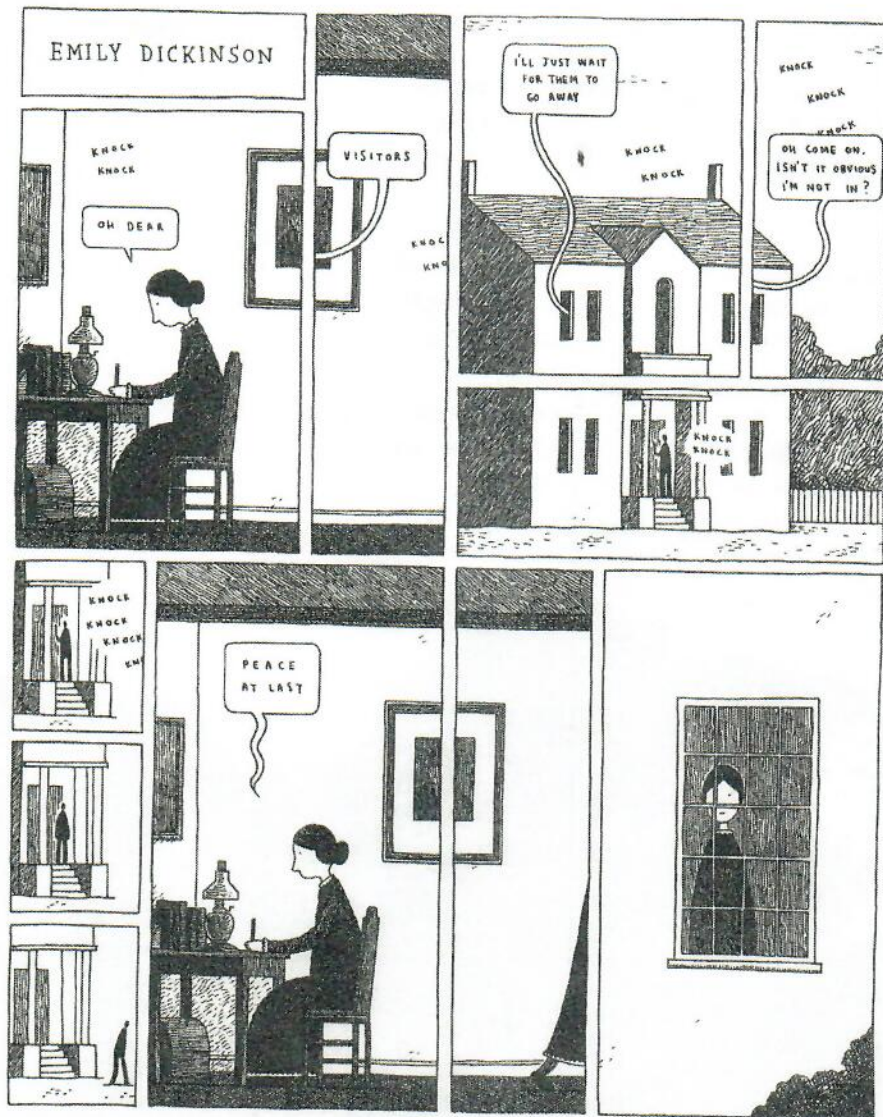
Emily Dickinson also found traditional poetic forms inadequate. Yet, where Whitman’s poems were expansive, hers were terse and compressed—a few brief lines packed with complex, original images. Her subject matter was intensely personal, and her themes

► For Your Outline

BRILLIANT MAVERICKS

- Whitman and Dickinson answered Emerson’s call for a national poet.
- Whitman was gregarious and outspoken; Dickinson, shy and reclusive.
- Both broke conventional rules of poetry.
- Whitman used free verse to write about everything American.
- Dickinson used compressed lines and complex imagery to explore personal themes.
- Both poets can be seen as transitional.





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ANALYZE VISUALS

This cartoon is one artist's representation of Emily Dickinson's reclusive nature. What other personality traits does the artist suggest about Dickinson in these panels?

were the great themes of life: love, death, immortality, and nature. Although she wrote nearly 1,800 poems, only a handful appeared in print during her lifetime. In fact, she was virtually unknown in her time, living a reclusive life that belied the intense creative fervor of her inner world.

Neither Dickinson nor Whitman can be easily categorized. Although Whitman can be considered a romantic poet because of his emphasis on individualism, emotion, and nature, his exploration of topics others found vulgar was certainly not romantic. Dickinson, too, could be aggressively unromantic, with her images of ordinary household items and her abrupt, unemotional tone. Perhaps both poets can be seen as transitional, moving with Americans of the day from romanticism to realism.

Literature of the Civil War

Of all human actions, none speaks so dramatically nor so violently as war. Of all wars, civil war by its very nature divides a nation's voice into factions. Among the diverse literary voices heard during the Civil War, some of the most powerful were African American.

Often at the urging of abolitionists, former slaves who escaped to the North published **slave narratives** detailing their experiences. These tales of suffering were immensely important to the cause of antislavery. Not simply autobiography, they were testimony, giving lie to Southern claims that slaves were happy and well-treated, that slavery was a "positive good" for both master and slave, and that people of African descent were inferior to whites. More than that, the narratives made readers *care* by showing that slaves were real human beings who suffered and wept and longed for freedom.

► For Your Outline

LITERATURE OF THE CIVIL WAR

- Slave narratives revealed the true nature of slavery and made readers care.
- Diaries and letters gave personal responses to historical events.
- Public documents influenced a large audience.
- Later fiction moved toward realism.

Fugitive slaves flee a Southern plantation at night in an attempt to reach the North.



Personal experience was central to the literature of the time, because everyday life now had great historical significance. Writers—male and female, white and black, from the highest-ranking general down to the common foot soldier—shared “their” Civil War in **diaries** and **letters**.

Voices from the Times

Many times I sat down in the mud determined to go no further, and willing to die to end my misery. But soon a friend would pass and urge me to make another effort, and I would stagger a mile further.

—Union soldier Elisha Rhodes

I daily part with my raiment for food. We find no one who will exchange eatables for Confederate money. So we are devouring our clothes.

—Southern diarist Mary Chesnut

While these writers addressed their words to friends and family (or even to themselves), others, such as President **Abraham Lincoln**, wrote for a larger audience. Still, Lincoln underestimated the reach of his words. “The world will little note, nor long remember, what we say here,” he proclaimed in his **Gettysburg Address**, which in fact proved to be one of the most enduring works of the Civil War era.

Lincoln’s speech, with its inspiring message and elevated language, represents the highest ideals of the period. The fiction created after the war by realistic writers such as **Ambrose Bierce** and **Stephen Crane**, however, shows the period in a harsher light. Their stories focus on the human tragedy of a war that destroyed hundreds of thousands of American lives, even as it freed many more.

In the years to come, **realism** would grow and refine itself to include the work of writers countrywide, from the frozen arctic north of Jack London to the plains of Willa Cather’s frontier. It would develop to include the work of naturalist writers who viewed human beings as passive victims of their environment. Brought on by the brutalities of the Civil War, realism would become the form that to some extent still dominates American literature today.

THE ARTISTS’ GALLERY



Prisoners from the Front (1866), Winslow Homer. Oil on canvas, 24" × 38". The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Mrs. Frank B. Porter, 1922 (22.207). Photo © 1995 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Winslow Homer

Known for his bold technique and unsentimental style, **Winslow Homer** was one of the most admired artists of the 19th century. He first rose to acclaim during the Civil War.

Behind Union Lines When war broke out, *Harper’s Weekly* sent Homer south, to draw illustrations for the magazine. The young artist camped out with the Union army and shared the soldiers’ hardships, from meager rations to the deadly threat of typhoid fever.

Homer rarely drew a battle scene, spurning the romantic elements of high drama and heroism. Instead, he recorded the reality of everyday life in camp—the boredom and sadness of men far from home. In 1863, a critic praised him as “the first of our artists who has endeavored to tell us any truth about the war.”

Civil War Masterpiece At first glance, the painting shown here might seem like nothing special, just soldiers standing in an empty field. Yet *Prisoners from the Front*, painted just after the war ended, won acclaim as the most powerful painting of the war. Why?

For Americans, this work had a deep symbolic meaning. In the soldiers, Homer conveys two opposing worldviews: the romantic, long-haired Southern officer confronts his Northern counterpart, who eyes him coolly. Behind them, the devastated landscape of the South tells the story of how the Civil War ends.