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A LEVEL

Delivery Guide

H472

ENGLISH LITERATURE

Theme:
American Literature 1880–1940

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Introduction

Delivery guides are designed to represent a body of knowledge about teaching a particular topic and contain:

- Content: a clear outline of the content covered by the delivery guide;
- Thinking Conceptually: expert guidance on the key concepts involved, common difficulties students may have, approaches to teaching that can help students understand these concepts and how this topic links conceptually to other areas of the subject;
- Thinking Contextually: a range of suggested teaching activities using a variety of themes so that different activities can be selected that best suit particular classes, learning styles or teaching approaches.

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Curriculum Content

This guide will focus upon the *American Literature 1880–1940* topic area listed for study as part of the A Level Comparative and Contextual study (Component 02). This Component is assessed externally by written examination and carries a total of 60 marks (40% of the marks for A Level). The examination is closed text. For Task 2, the Comparative essay, there will be a choice of three questions, one related to each of the two core set texts for the topic area and one general question which will not name a particular set text. Candidates choose **one** question worth 30 marks and write an essay comparing at least two whole texts, at least one of which must come from the core set text list for the topic of choice. The other text may come from the list of eight further suggested set texts. Candidates will be expected to range across the texts in their responses, demonstrating their knowledge of the whole text.

Task 2 requires students to establish connections between their chosen texts (AO4); demonstrate their appreciation of the significance of cultural and contextual influences on writers and readers (AO3); and read texts in a variety of ways, responding critically and creatively (AO5), in addition to AO1. AO2 is not assessed in Task 2. Setting aside AO2 gives candidates greater opportunity to build and sustain a comparative discussion focusing on the contexts, connections and interpretations of their chosen set texts, without having to interrupt the continuity of their comparison in order to 'step aside' and demonstrate AO2 in a single text. However, where students discuss, for example, the use of symbolism or the presentation of persona or character in their chosen texts, such discussion can be rewarded under AO1 ('informed' responses to literary texts), AO4 ('connections' across literary texts) or AO5 ('different interpretations'). Opportunity to satisfy AO2 is afforded by Task 1 of the component where candidates undertake a 'Close Reading' of one unseen prose extract. In this way Task 1 ensures candidates have an opportunity to address AO2 more directly than the weighting of the Task 2 response requires.

The core and suggested texts for the *American Literature 1880–1940* topic area are as follows:

Core set texts

F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*
John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*

Suggested set texts

Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady*
Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*
Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*
Willa Cather, *My Ántonia*
Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*
William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*
Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms*
Richard Wright, *Native Son*



Thinking Conceptually

Approaches to teaching the content

1880 marks an important conceptual boundary. The idea of 'the frontier' as geographic reality and metaphor for the potential of all Americans to forge a new life in the vast territories of the West (*My Antonia* and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*) waned with the end of opportunities for settlers. American Romanticism, exemplified by writers such as Poe, Hawthorne, Whitman, Melville, Thoreau and Emerson, was losing its dominant position. Students should understand how notions such as 'the frontier' and the individualism inherent in Romanticism are not simply discarded after 1880 but rather survive as crucial concepts underpinning the literature that follows. The 'frontier' endures as an elusive, ill-defined paradise in 'road movies' and novels such as Kerouac's *On the Road*. The Romantic ideal of the individual tested by circumstance persists in works such as Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* and in later writers. The Civil War had increased cultural differences between the North and South; this difference persists and is evident in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*.

Thinking beyond 1880, students should be alerted to developments in the literature of the late 19th and early 20th centuries that gave rise to texts defined by greater realism and urban settings. The influence of Naturalism is also strongly felt during this era as environmental and genetic imperatives are presented as the principal forces driving human behaviour, causing characters to act in ways inexplicable to themselves (Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*). Teachers should make students aware of the European traditions evident in the 'society' novels of Henry James and Edith Wharton, whose subject matter is relationships within America's wealthy, globe-trotting upper-middle class elite; an elite whose status often depends upon

connections to European nobility. The plight of women becomes a particular focus in these narratives whose indirect style, lack of sentimentality and almost clinical analysis of the decline of an American 'nobility', particularly exposes the vulnerability of 'unconnected' female members who are shown to be, ultimately, expendable. The replacement of this cosmopolitan, 'old-fashioned' set by a brash and overtly capitalist elite is the subject of many novels of the 1920s, notably Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. The failure of Gatsby's dream and its connection to the more problematic concept of an 'American Dream' foreshadows the Wall Street crash and the Depression that shook Americans' faith in the unfettered capitalism they believed made their country great. The literature that reflects this ideological questioning often depicts an 'under-class' hidden from view in much American writing (c.f. Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*). Although black writers had been published in America from the late 19th century, the Depression gave rise to a new generation who wrote more politicised and disturbing novels (classified as Urban Realism) than their predecessors. Amongst these is Richard Wright's *Native Son* which, though condemned for appearing to condone its protagonist's crimes, nonetheless sought to counter the sentimentalised and demeaning depictions of black families in novels such as Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Common misconceptions or difficulties students may have

- During the Colonial era (conventionally regarded as beginning with the founding of Jamestown in 1607 and ending with the Declaration of Independence in 1776) many settlers wrote literature. This literature is



Thinking Conceptually

regarded, rightly or wrongly, as *English Literature* written in America. To demonstrate how assumptions about nomenclature become problematic one need only consider the case of Ann Bradstreet. Bradstreet was born in Northampton, England in 1612. Having emigrated to New England in 1630, she began to write poetry in the style of the English poetry of the Jacobean era. In common with many colonists, Bradstreet would have regarded herself as English. Her poetry was first published in England. Paradoxically, in spite of the fact that the Declaration of Independence that founded the America we know today was not pronounced until Bradstreet had been dead for nearly a century and a half, she is often claimed not only as *America's* first poet but her first *female* poet.

- American Literature proper is regarded as beginning in the National era (from 1776 onwards) despite the fact that no defining stylistic changes or literary innovations distinguish writing dating from the beginning of this era from that of the Colonial era. Ironically, the most significant influences upon American writers came from England, generations *after* the Declaration of Independence. These came from the writing of Sir Walter Scott, Alexander Pope, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Wordsworth and Anne Radcliffe, among others. Indeed, the establishment of a national literature of America depended very much upon the use of British and European models. It was not until Emerson's *Essays*

established, in the mid-nineteenth century, the criteria by which American Literature should be created and judged, that American Literature could be regarded as genuinely original and distinctive.

- In teaching American Literature it is necessary to make students aware that sub-generic categories, literary movements and divisions into historical eras, must always be seen as approximations open to distortion or over-simplification. Texts should be read closely and analysed carefully in order to assess the relevance and influence of particular periods, movements or styles rather than imposing upon them rigid categories.

Conceptual links to other areas of the specification

The kind of close reading skills fostered by the activities in the Content section of this guide, and practiced in analysing the set texts, will not only assist students in studying the texts they encounter in this Component, but will contribute to the development of reading strategies that will enable them to formulate, test and articulate informed and personal responses to any and all of texts they encounter as part of A Level English Literature and beyond. It is important that students are made aware that, even though the focus of this topic area is American Literature 1880–1940, the fundamental questions they will ask when they read the texts set for this Component (who is writing, who narrates, what are the contexts, who is reading, how can this be interpreted) apply universally, regardless of period or genre.



Thinking Conceptually

Introduction to activities

The activities outlined below present students with a range of extracts from novels whose publication predates 1880, the date which, in political and historical terms, marks the end of the period of consolidation of the United States of America. The 'background' reading that these extracts provide will introduce students to the cultural and conceptual hinterland from which pioneering texts of American literature developed and point to ways in which these early texts reveal influences and raise questions relevant to later American texts. These questions include the presentation of non-white Americans (*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *My Antonia*, *The Great Gatsby*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Native Son*); the treatment of women (*The Portrait of a Lady*, *Sister Carrie*, *The Age of Innocence*, *The Great Gatsby*, *A Farewell to Arms*, *The Grapes of Wrath*) and

the importance of Europe (*The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Age of Innocence*, *The Great Gatsby*).

Understanding how novels before 1880 foreshadow, in their themes and questions, the concerns of later American authors, will help students establish an informed basis from which to analyse the set texts.

Students may be given the following extracts to read carefully and annotate as homework or as an exercise to be undertaken in collaboration with a partner or group. They should then respond to the questions provided. Students should be encouraged to look for and to consider connections between the various extracts provided in these activities and the set texts they are studying. Their responses can be shared in whole class discussion.



Thinking Conceptually

Activity 1: James Fenimore Cooper, *The Pioneers* (1823)

Fenimore Cooper is one of America's earliest novelists. His style and subject matter owe much to the historical tradition developed by the Scottish writer, Sir Walter Scott. Despite their designation as 'historical' Scott's works are, in reality, heavily romanticised and fictionalised accounts of Scottish history. Since no established American tradition of novel writing existed, Fenimore Cooper drew upon Scott's techniques to write about America at a time during which there were very few settlements in a vast wilderness.

The extract below is taken from chapter 7 of *The Pioneers* (1823). In this novel a group of settlers make their home in upper New York state. The small community is dominated by Judge Temple and subject to his Puritanical beliefs. At the edge of the settlement an ageing hunter, known variously as Leatherstocking, Natty Bumppo and Hawkeye, lives with a native American called Chingachgook (who became the last of the Mohicans in the novel of that name). The novel was so successful that Cooper was obliged to write many more to satisfy the demands of a growing readership. Because Hawkeye and Chingachgook are introduced in *The Pioneers* as old men, Cooper had to make all subsequent novels 'prequels.'

Cooper's novel demonstrates the influence of European literature upon emergent settler authors. The extract that follows provokes questions about the ways in which settlers viewed native inhabitants' existence as 'savage' and saw themselves as a 'civilising' force. The same view justified the enslavement of African people as a morally and religiously legitimate enterprise.

From his long association with the white men, the habits of Mohegan were a mixture of the civilised and savage states, though there was certainly a strong preponderance in favor¹ of the latter. In common with all his people who dwelt within the influence of the Anglo-Americans, he had acquired new wants, and his dress was a mixture of his native and European fashions. Notwithstanding the intense cold without, his head was uncovered; but a profusion of long, black, coarse hair concealed his forehead, his crown, and even hung about his cheeks, so as to convey the idea, to one who knew his present and former conditions, that he encouraged its abundance, as a willing veil, to hide the shame of a noble soul, mourning for glory once known. His forehead, when it could be seen, appeared lofty, broad, and noble. His nose was high, and of the kind called Roman, with nostrils that expanded, in his seventieth year, with the freedom that had distinguished them in youth. His mouth was large, but compressed, and possessing a great share of expression and character; and, when opened, it discovered [revealed] a perfect set of short, strong, and regular teeth. His chin was full, though not prominent; and his face bore the infallible mark of his people, in its square, high cheekbones. The eyes were not large, but their black orbs glittered in the rays of the candles, as he gazed intently down the hall, like two balls of fire.

¹ Spelling here reflects the American system.



Thinking Conceptually

Activity 1: Questions

- 1) Why is there so much detail about Chingachgook's physical appearance? What do you take the narrator's perspective to be (does the narrator show sympathy and approval or view Chingachgook as 'other')? Explain your response by quoting from the extract.
- 2) There are a number of contrasting adjectives in the passage, such as 'civilised' and 'savage'. Find some more examples and suggest how these are used to present Chingachgook to the reader.
- 3) Why do you think the author/narrator presents the character using these oppositions?
- 4) Chingachgook is presented at the moment that he enters Judge Temple's house. Why is it at that moment that we are given this very detailed description?

Research Task:

Investigate the origins of the European concept of the 'noble savage'. How does this concept extend your understanding of the presentation of Chingachgook? Does this concept bear any relevance to attitudes and assumptions revealed in the set texts you are studying?



Thinking Conceptually

Activity 2: Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (1850)

Nathaniel Hawthorne was one of the most important writers of American Romanticism. Like many of his fellow authors, he was strongly influenced by the aesthetic ideas of the English poet and critic, Samuel Taylor Coleridge. *The Scarlet Letter* is set in Boston in the seventeenth century, a time when Boston was not much more than a settlement of wooden houses in a forest clearing. The community presented is dominated by the Puritan beliefs imported by the settlers. Hester Prynne is a settler from England who arrives before her husband, who is presumed dead. Although Hester was not pregnant when she arrived, she later gives birth to a daughter, Pearl. Hester will not reveal the identity of the child's father and is imprisoned, made to stand at a pillory in front of all the citizens and made to wear a red letter A on all her clothing. Hawthorne's is one of the first American novels to use symbolism to convey meanings and to hint at supernatural or uncanny events and forces.

Hawthorn's novel explores:

- contemporaneous attitudes towards women and towards female sexuality
- the relationship between religion and the law
- the prevalence of superstition and fear in small, isolated communities (Arthur Miller's play about the persecution of supposed witches, *The Crucible*, is set in the same era)
- the power held by male clergy and their domination as lawmakers and leaders of settler communities
- the influence of Romanticism as a literary movement originating in Europe.

The following extract is taken from the chapter 2 of the novel. Hester Prynne is shown leaving the prison with her daughter, who was born there. The people of Boston have come to watch.

The young woman was tall, with a figure of perfect elegance, on a large scale. She had dark and abundant hair, so glossy that it threw off the sunshine with a gleam, and a face which, besides being beautiful from regularity of feature and richness of complexion, had the impressiveness belonging to a marked brow and deep black eyes. She was ladylike too, after the manner of the feminine gentility of those days; characterised by a certain state and dignity, rather than by the delicate, evanescent, and indestructible grace, which is now recognised as its indication. And never had Hester Prynne appeared more lady-like, in the antique interpretation of the term, than as she issued from the prison. Those who had before known her, and had expected to behold her dimmed and obscured by a disastrous cloud, were astonished, and even startled, to perceive how her beauty shone out, and made a halo of the misfortune and ignominy in which she was enveloped. It may be true that, to a sensitive observer, there was something exquisitely painful in it. Her attire, which, indeed, she had wrought for the occasion, in prison, and had modelled much after her own fancy, seemed to express the attitude of her spirit, the desperate recklessness of her mood, by its wild and picturesque peculiarity. But the point which drew all eyes, and, as it were, transfigured the wearer, - so that both men and women, who had been familiarly acquainted with Hester Prynne, were now impressed as if they beheld her for the first time,- was that SCARLET LETTER, so fantastically embroidered and illuminated upon her bosom. It had the effect of a spell, taking her out of the ordinary relations with humanity, and inclosing her in a sphere by herself.

Read and annotate this extract carefully then answer the questions that follow. Explain your responses by quoting from the extract(s).



Thinking Conceptually

Activity 2: Questions

- 1) In what ways is the description of Hester Prynne different from the presentation of Chingachgook and in what ways is it similar? Explain your response by quoting from both extracts.
- 2) Which do you consider to be the more realistic: the depiction of Chingachgook or that of Hester Prynne? Explain your response by quoting from both extracts.
- 3) Is there any suggestion that the description of Hester Prynne is from a male perspective?
- 4) How is her clothing and, in particular, the scarlet letter embroidered on her dress, described? What is suggested by this?
- 5) What is surprising about the description of Hester Prynne, given that she is emerging from prison, holding a child that is not her husband's child?
- 6) What do you think the scarlet letter A stands for?

Research Task:

The American Romantic movement was strongly influenced by a group of philosophers and critics known as the Transcendentalists. Find out what their ideas were and explore their relevance to the novels you are studying.



Thinking Conceptually

Activity 3: Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852)

Harriet Beecher Stowe was an abolitionist (a campaigner for the abolition of slavery). She wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in an attempt to persuade politicians and American citizens to see black people in a positive light.

Some of the themes explored in the novel are:

- religion as a 'civilising' influence on America's black population
- the importance of the family in the life of black people (black slaves were prohibited from living in family groups)
- the distorting effect of slavery on the lives and behaviour of black Americans.

Read the following passage from chapter 4 of the novel, in which Uncle Tom is depicted:

Uncle Tom was a sort of patriarch² in religious matters, in the neighbourhood. Having, naturally, an organization in which the *morale* was strongly predominant, together with a greater breadth and cultivation of mind than obtained³ among his companions, he was looked up to with great respect, as a sort of minister among them; and the simple, hearty, sincere style of his exhortations might have edified even better educated persons. But it was in prayer that he especially excelled. Nothing could exceed the touching simplicity, the child-like earnestness of his prayer, enriched with the language of Scripture, which seemed so entirely to have wrought itself into his being, as to have become a part of himself, and to drop from his lips unconsciously; in the language of a pious old negro, he 'prayed right up.' And so much did his prayer always work on the devotional feelings of his audiences, that there seemed often a danger that it would be lost altogether in the abundance of the responses which broke out everywhere around him.

² A father figure who has authority and is looked up to by a community.

³ existed



Thinking Conceptually

Activity 3: Questions

Explain your responses by quoting from the extract. You should consider whether there are any connections between this extract and the set texts you are studying.

- 1) What techniques are used by Beecher Stowe to present Uncle Tom in a manner that might change white readers' perceptions of black people? Explain your response by quoting from the extract.
- 2) Is the presentation of Uncle Tom always a positive one?
- 3) Which aspects of Uncle Tom's description are emphasised?
- 4) Which aspects of Beecher Stowe's portrayal of Uncle Tom do you think today's black Americans would find objectionable?
- 5) Drawing upon your previous research into the origins of the concept of the 'noble savage,' comment on Beecher Stowe's presentation of Uncle Tom.

Research Task:

Find out about the Abolitionist movement and its influence upon American literature.



Thinking Conceptually

Activity 4: Herman Melville, *Benito Cereno* (1856)

In Virginia in 1831 a slave revolt led by Nat Turner resulted in the brutal murder of sixty or more white men, women and children on several plantations. The revolt was suppressed and 'revenge' attacks on slaves, both by soldiers and by the local population, killed an estimated 200 black people, most of whom had taken no part in the revolt. As a result of the rebellion, education of slaves ceased and much stricter controls were placed upon them. Herman Melville's novella, *Benito Cereno*, has been interpreted as an allegory of the events in the slave rebellion.

Captain Amasa Delano, sees a Spanish ship, the San Dominick, drifting and in a poor condition. When he boards the ship to offer help, he finds that black men and women have been given free rein and are over-familiar with the white crew. He attributes this to Spanish lassitude and to Captain Benito Cereno's lack of leadership qualities. In fact, the ship has been taken over by the slaves, several members of the crew have been killed and the remaining Spanish sailors have been compelled, under threat of death, to behave as if they are still in command. Because he sees the best in everybody, Captain Delano does not realise the true situation until he is about to leave the ship.

Read and annotate the following extracts from *Benito Cereno*.

Extract 4 (a)

In this extract, Babo, the leader of the slave revolt, poses as Captain Cereno's servant and shaves him.

There is something in the negro, which, in a peculiar way, fits him for avocations about one's person. Most negroes are natural valets and hair-dressers; taking to the comb and brush congenially as to castinets, and flourishing them apparently with almost equal satisfaction. There is, too, a smooth tact about them in this employment, with a marvelous, noiseless, gliding briskness, not ungraceful in its way, singularly pleasing to behold, and still more to be the manipulated subject of. And above all is the great gift of good-humor. Not the mere grin or laugh is here meant. Those were unsuitable. But a certain easy cheerfulness, harmonious in every glance and gesture; as though God has set the whole negro to some pleasant tune.



Thinking Conceptually

Activity 4: Questions – Extract 4 (a)

Explain your responses by quoting from the extract.

- 1) In which ways is the presentation of Babo similar to that of Uncle Tom?
- 2) Does the passage contain any racial stereotypes that remain prevalent today?
- 3) What function does religion serve in the presentation of Babo?
- 4) Later on in the narrative, the reader, along with Captain Delano, discovers that Babo is the leader of a revolt and that Captain Cereno believes that he is about to cut his throat. How does this knowledge make this presentation of Babo ironic?
- 5) Babo, in spite of his characterisation in the extract above as a cheerful servant, is later revealed as the ruthless leader of the revolt against the white crew of the slave ship. Which would you argue to be the more 'positive' portrayal of the black man: the cheerful servant or the violent rebel?



Thinking Conceptually

Extract 4 (b)

In the following extract, taken from the end of the story, Captain Delano is about to leave the Spanish ship in a small boat when Captain Cereno leaps aboard with him, followed by Babo, armed with a dagger. Finally, Captain Delano understands the true nature of the situation on board.

Both the black's hands were held, as, glancing up towards the *San Dominick*, Captain Delano, now with scales dropped from his eyes, saw the negroes, not in misrule, not in tumult, not as if frantically concerned for Don Benito, but with mask torn away, flourishing hatchets and knives, in ferocious piratical revolt. Like delirious black dervishes, the six Ashantees⁴ danced on the poop.⁵ Prevented by their foes from springing into the water, the Spanish boys were hurrying up to the topmost spars, while such of the few Spanish sailors, not already in the sea, less alert, were descried,⁶ helplessly mixed in, on deck, with the blacks.

Meantime Captain Delano hailed his own vessel, ordering the ports up, and the guns run out. But by this time the cable of the *San Dominick* had been cut; and the fag-end [of the cable], in lashing out, whipped away the canvas shroud about the beak⁷ suddenly revealing, as the bleached hull swung round towards the open ocean, death for the figure-head, in a human skeleton; chalky comment on the chalked words below, *'Follow your leader.'* [The skeleton is that of Aranda, the slave trader, whose flesh has been hacked off and possibly eaten by the slaves]

4 A powerful warrior tribe from West Africa.

5 The highest deck on a ship.

6 observed.

7 The bow of the ship.



Thinking Conceptually

Activity 4: Questions – Extract 4(b)

Explain your responses by quoting from the extract.

- 1) How is it possible for Captain Delano to see the black men on the ship as both meek and servile and ruthless, bloodthirsty cannibals?
- 2) The black men on the ship had been taken from their native land to be sold into slavery for profit. To what extent does Melville's novella present their revolt as a justified one?
- 3) Is Captain Delano's capacity to see all humans in a positive light a good characteristic or a foolish one?
- 4) In what ways can the story be seen as an allegory of the Nat Turner slave rebellion?
- 5) How do you think that readers, both black and white, would have viewed the story when it was published in 1856?

Research Task:

The novella *Benito Cereno* contains a good deal of ambiguity and duality (the two opposing presentations of the black slaves; the unresolved question of who is right and who is wrong; the portrayal of Captain Delano as a good Christian and a gullible fool, for instance). Ambiguity and duality are characteristic of 19th century American Literature and, indeed, some 20th century American Literature. Find out about these aspects of American writing and suggest reasons for their prevalence.



Thinking Conceptually

Activity 5: Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Marble Faun* (1860)

Although Hawthorne's earlier novels were explorations of an emerging American national identity as a distinct cultural and political entity, his last novel, *The Marble Faun*, is set entirely in Italy and takes as its subject the disturbed reactions of three American artists to Italy's different cultural and political traditions. As do the novels of Henry James and Edith Wharton, Hawthorne's novel considers the continuing influence of Europe's ancient civilisations and cultures upon modern America. While much of the novel is concerned with art, the cruel, inscrutable, lawless, superstitious nature of Italy (as narrator and protagonists see it) is often personified in the almost supernatural presentation of Count Donatello. Each of the American protagonists responds in different ways to this foreign environment but, ironically, all discover something in themselves that corresponds with the dark nature of mid-nineteenth century Italy.

In the following extract (from chapter 36, 'Hilda's Tower'), Rome is described from the perspective of the narrator (whose use of the pronoun 'we' in the extract quoted, might be read as encompassing the novel's protagonists and its original readership).

When we have once long known Rome, and left her where she lies, like a long decaying corpse, retaining a trace of the noble shape it was, but with accumulated dust and a fungous growth overspreading all its more admirable features – left her in utter weariness, no doubt, of her narrow, crooked, intricate streets, so uncomfortably paved with little squares of lava that to tread over them is a penitential pilgrimage, so indescribably ugly, moreover, so cold, so alley-like, into which the sun never falls, and where a chill wind forces its deadly breath into our lungs – left her, tired of the sight of her immense seven storied, yellow washed hovels, or call them palaces, where all that is dreary in domestic life seems magnified and multiplied, and weary of climbing those staircases, which ascend from a ground floor of cookshops, cobblers' stalls, stables, and regiments of cavalry, to a middle region of princes, cardinals, and ambassadors, and an upper tier of artists, just beneath the unattainable sky – left her worn out with shivering at the cheerless and smoky fireside by day, and feasting with our own substance the ravenous little populace of a Roman bed at night – left her, sick at heart of Italian trickery, which has uprooted whatever faith in man's integrity had endured till now, and sick at stomach of sour bread, sour wine, rancid butter, and bad cookery, needlessly bestowed on evil meats – left her, disgusted with the pretence of holiness and the reality of nastiness, each equally omnipresent – left her, half lifeless from the languid atmosphere, the vital principle of which has been used up long ago, or corrupted by myriads of slaughters – left her, crushed down in spirit with the desolation of her ruin, and the hopelessness of her future – left her, in short, hating her with all our might, and adding our individual curse to the infinite anathema which her old crimes have unmistakably brought down – when we have left Rome in such a mood as this, we are astonished by the discovery, by and by, that our heartstrings have mysteriously attached themselves again to the Eternal City, and are drawing us thitherward again, as if it were even more familiar, more intimately our home, than even the spot where we were born.



Thinking Conceptually

Activity 5: Questions

- 1) What do you notice about the structure of this extract? How does that structure affect Hawthorne's:
 - a) presentation of Rome
 - b) presentation of the narrator's view of Rome?

How might the structure and tone of the extract have affected the response of readers in the 1860s to Rome and Europe?

- 2) Hawthorne, as a dominant proponent of American Romanticism, adopted many of the techniques established by European Romanticists (e.g. the use of nature to produce atmospheric effects, classical allusion, the symbolic use of landscape, hints at the supernatural). However, in this extract, Hawthorne seems to dismiss Rome as a centre of European culture. Can you think of any reasons why this extract is so dismissive?
- 3) The narrator is critical of 'princes, cardinals, and ambassadors', all of whom would have owed their wealth and status to the Catholic Church. What was the dominant religion amongst America's settlers? In what ways did this conflict with Catholicism?
- 4) In presenting the occupants of the 'hovels' or 'palaces' of Rome, the narrator allots each group/trade a place in a clearly defined hierarchy: 'cookshops, cobblers' stalls, stables...ambassadors, and an upper tier of artists.' Why might this system of social stratification have seemed anathema to a country founded upon the values of the Declaration of Independence?
- 5) Look at the final lines of the extract, from 'when we have left Rome in such a mood as this...' to '...the spot where we were born.' Consider carefully the narrator's admission of a recurring desire to return to the Rome that has been so comprehensively savaged in the preceding lines. What might these closing lines suggest about the relative strength of the forces driving separation from Europe and those that continue to tie America and Americans to Europe?



Thinking Contextually

In political and historical terms, 1880 marks the end of the period of the consolidation of the United States of America. The capture of Geronimo, leader of the Apaches, in 1885, marked the end of the 'Indian Wars'. The United States of America became a unitary state with English as its official language and white Europeans as the dominant racial group. Earlier, in 1865, the defeat of the Southern Confederates by the Northern Yankees, though it brought an end to the slave owning patrician society of the south as a political reality, increased the cultural differences between north and south which persisted long afterwards. Following America's war with Spain at the end of the 19th century and its failed interventions in the Mexican Revolution, American politicians avoided involvement in international politics. At the outbreak of World War 1, however, this neutrality was challenged by recent European immigrants and America finally entered the war in 1917. Ironically, the imposition of Prohibition in 1920, based as it was upon religious and moral imperatives, led to an increase in organised crime on an unprecedented scale. The Wall Street Crash in 1929 and the Depression that followed caused many Americans to question their faith in the unfettered capitalism they believed had made their country great. The endurance of White Supremacy organisations – dominant, in various guises, since before the Civil War – exposed the fact that the Declaration's assertion that 'all men are created equal' excluded black people. Outrage at the lynchings of black people in the years leading up to (and beyond) 1940 was registered in popular culture, notably through the publication (1937) of Abel Meeropol's poem 'Strange Fruit.' Meeropol's words and the atrocities they exposed were immortalised by Billie Holiday, who recorded and performed her version in New York venues including Madison Square Gardens.

The following exercises direct students to research ideas, groups and events that will establish an informed understanding of the various contexts from which the texts set for the study of this topic might be considered. The activities may be tackled individually, in pairs or as a group exercise. The research will be most useful if it produces a tangible outcome: students might construct a detailed timeline, pool their findings to produce a booklet, collaborate in producing a presentation.



Thinking Contextually

Activities

Activity 1: The 'American Dream'

The concept of the 'American Dream' should be considered, first and foremost, as one that emerges out of, and evolves from, the Founding Fathers' 'invention' of America. The United States of America, the Declaration of Independence (1776) asserts, will be defined by the equality of 'all men' and founded upon the provision of 'unalienable rights' such as the (intangible and immeasurable) 'pursuit of Happiness.' Such principles, though undoubtedly admirable, must be judged in terms of their political practicality and their historical realisation. What was clear from the outset was that 'all men' did not include *all* women, nor did it include *all* people of colour. Though at its best the Founding Fathers' 'dream,' as manifested in the promises of the Declaration of Independence, provided a worthy ideal towards which modern America could and would aspire, the setting of such lofty and intangible goals could be said to invite failure and disappointment. The boundless imagination implicit in the Founding Fathers' Declaration translates easily into belief in the boundless potential of America's citizens to fulfil their individual 'American Dream.' Of course, for the many immigrants who arrived in America penniless and prospered from their labour and enterprise, the dream might well have seemed a reality. For those who did not prosper, it was not a dream that betrayed them but the capitalism in which they had placed their faith.

Research the Declaration of Independence and consider its language carefully and in light of its political practicality.

Consider the extent to which the 'American Dream' emanates from the promises of the Declaration. **Think about** how far the Founding Fathers' 'dreams' as they are stated in the Declaration are either fulfilled or disappointed in the set texts you study.

- How far do your texts present the 'American Dream' as one capable of achievement?
- How far might the 'American Dream' be said to be a damaging and dangerous illusion?



Thinking Contextually

Activities

Activity 2: The rise of the 'New Woman' in society and literature

The closing decades of the nineteenth and those which open the twentieth century gave rise to a unique social phenomenon: that of the 'New Woman.' The increase in educated and independent women who sought fulfilment beyond the bounds of marriage and motherhood was a cause for rejoicing amongst those women for whom traditional female roles amounted to a kind of gender enslavement. For others - both men and women - the 'New Woman' was a disturbing and socially divisive construct that went 'against nature' and was bound to have dreadful repercussions in terms of women's physical and mental health and, most important, their fertility. The 'New Woman' emerged in Europe and America at around the same time.

Find out as much as you can about the 'New Woman' as she emerges as a presence in American and European society. How, and by whom, was the 'New Woman' represented in European and American literature? What were the responses to this social phenomenon in society and literature? **Consider** the results of your research in the light of the texts you are studying.

- Does your research shed light upon the literary representation of women in the set texts?

Activity 3: White Supremacy

White Supremacy is the belief that white people are superior to people of other racial backgrounds. This movement in America can be traced back to a period that predates the Civil War (1861-65). The ideas put forward by proponents of this ideology persist throughout the historical period covered by the set texts for this topic.

Find out as much as you can about White Supremacy in America and the counter movements formed to oppose its racist agenda. Your research should include the Atlantic Slave Trade, the Jim Crow Laws, the various waves of Klu Klux Klan activity and miscegenation laws.

Think about how non-white people are represented in the texts you study.

- Are non-white characters underrepresented in the novels you are studying?
- Are they absent from your texts?
- Are they represented in stereotypical ways?

Find out about black American authors, their works and the themes and questions they raise.



Thinking Contextually

Activities

Activity 4: Prohibition, its motivations and consequences

Prohibition was introduced in America in 1920, enforcing a nationwide ban on the sale, production, import and transportation of alcoholic beverages. There were a variety of motivations behind the introduction of Prohibition.

In researching this topic you should consider:

- the part played by social, political and religious groupings in initiating and enforcing Prohibition
- the various social, moral, religious, economic and public health imperatives that underpinned the drive for Prohibition
- bootlegging and speakeasies
- the part Prohibition played in the growth of organised crime
- why Prohibition legislation was withdrawn.

Activity 5: The Wall Street Crash and the Depression

Though the Wall Street Crash did not take place until October 1929, there were signs that it was imminent as early as 1926.

The Crash and the Depression that followed it inflicted a severe blow upon the American people, the effects going far beyond the obvious financial consequences.

In researching this area you should consider:

- the causes of the Depression
- the effects of the Crash upon: the economy/banking system, unemployment
- the psychological effects of the Crash on Americans' faith in capitalism and their country's status
- the Dust Bowl, Route 66, Okies/migrant workers
- the effect of the Depression on employment.





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