

TB: A very good paper. I especially appreciate the Conclusion. Irina, your work throughout the semester and your creative investment in the course were significant, important and sound.

Secret Hidden in a Book

“That is part of the beauty of all literature. You discover that your longings are universal longings, that you're not lonely and isolated from anyone. You belong.” These are the words of one of the greatest American writers F. Scott Fitzgerald. He could not be more right; literature unites people. The power it holds is undeniably immense as it connects people of different backgrounds spread over the huge territories. Literature can serve people in many ways, from reading a fairy tale to a child when putting him or her to bed to addressing flaws in the society of a country or unifying a nation in the face of a war. Most importantly, literature shapes, complements culture, and the former is also influenced by the latter. They both form the world we live in and how we choose to spend our time given. People who read are also the ones who create and contribute to societies. This can be illustrated by the Russian literature of the 19th century. Such bright and gifted writers and poets as Pushkin, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Turgenev, Chekhov completely changed the perception of Russia on the West. They charmed Europe with their beautifully raw, complex, and unique ideas about life, destiny, love so that the Russian people and culture were revealed to the societies of the outer world. This is just a small example of how literature can truly change the world. Literature also played an important part in creating a true American spirit, so-called Americanism. **good point!** In the words of the 26th President of USA Theodore Roosevelt: “Americanism is a question of spirit, conviction, and purpose, not of creed or birthplace.” The USA was once and still is for many people a dreamland full of opportunities and money. Nevertheless, Americanism is also equality which needs to be fought for, progress which costs lives of people, this is hard work. For many people from the outside, myself, in particular, the US is a distant place full of hidden secrets and dangers, but one thing I know for certain – literature can tell me a bit about those beliefs, mysteries, hazards. **good idea**

In the year of 1783, when the United States won the Revolutionary War and became independent from the British Crown, Irving Washington was born in New York City. He is vastly credited as the first American “Man of Letters” and also was one of the first American writers to earn critical acclaim in Europe. Having written ones of the earliest examples of American fiction “Rip Van Winkle” (1819) and “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” (1820), he encouraged other yet-to-be-prominent American authors such as N. Hawthorne, H. Longfellow, Edgar A. Poe, and H. Melville. Irving introduced Romanticism of European origin to the US altering it to fit the American reality. A great deal of values and ideals we frequently identify as the American principles – such as democracy and individualism – are reflected in the works of American

Romantics which contributed to spreading those principles. The writers of the Romantic era in the US not only reflected those things that make the American character unique, but they also played a big part in establishing them. J. Fenimore Cooper, Edgar A. Poe, and N. Hawthorne were leading Romantic writers who brought vast popularity in the Old World to the US. Cooper's historical novels known as "Leatherstocking Tales" (1827 – 1841) nurtured an original American art and culture; he pretty much himself created a unique form of American literature. Hawthorne's dark Romantic novels inspired by Puritan New England explored the themes of guilt, sin, and evil ("The House of the Seven Gables", "Scarlet Letter", both published in 1850), he wrote about things that were considered taboo in his time, such as witchcraft, scientific innovations, and experimentation ("The House of the Seven Gables", "Birthmark" (1843), "Artist of the Beautiful" (1844) and many more). Hawthorne was a master of prose who revealed his characters' psychological and moral depths with his architectonic sense of form and insight inherited from the Puritan tradition of moral earnestness. Another eminent Romantic author was Edgar Allan Poe who is considered not only the central figure of Romanticism in the United States but the central figure of American literature as a whole.

Edgar Allan Poe had a rough childhood, having orphaned at the age of 2. He failed to graduate from the University of Virginia due to financial problems, nor did he become a cadet at West Point. During his lifetime, he was mainly known as a literary critic. J. R. Lowell, an American Romantic poet, called him "the most discriminating, philosophical, and fearless critic upon imaginative works who has written in America."¹ E. A. Poe wrote around one thousand essays, articles, reviews, columns, and critical notices; he believed his role as a critic included exposing poor writing and demanding American writers to meet higher standards². His harsh reviews earned him the nickname "The man with the tomahawk". E. A. Poe criticized N. Hawthorne denouncing him as "peculiar and not original", J. Fenimore Cooper also did not escape the sharp head of the tomahawk belonging to E. A. Poe: "We did not look for character in it, for that is not Cooper's forte; nor did we expect that his heroine would be aught better than the inanimate thing she is." However, more than anyone Poe was unimpressed with H. Longfellow calling him "the GREAT MOGUL of the Imitators"³ saying he was guilty of "the most barbarous class of literary robbery."⁴ Poe was merciless towards his contemporaries (who did not think much of him either) only because he was strongly opinionated towards what constitutes good literature. **good point :))** He perfected the rules of writing in his essay "The Philosophy of Composition" (1846). In the essay, Poe concludes that the length of a poem (exactly a hundred and eight lines), methodical and analytical approach to poetry and "unity of effect" (author's beforehand intention to end a poem in a specific way as to create a certain emotional response, or "effect") are essential

to consider for good writing. Poe exemplifies his point of view with his poem “The Raven” (1845) which is considered to be one of the most famous poems ever written.

Indeed, “The Raven” is such an exquisite piece of writing that it captures the soul of the reader without letting it go for the next couple of hours; even after that “The Raven” becomes a part of you. Poe claimed that no aspect of the poem was an accident, but is based on total control which only amazed me as a reader. The poem seems to have walked out from a lucid dream or a sleep paralysis. I became mesmerized by “The Raven” from the first line:

Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary
With the help of this one line, the story becomes almost clear. The first line of the poem demonstrates a rather theatrical scene; beginning with the classic, “once upon a -” and presenting a sentimental, “weak and weary” character who is lost in thought during an especially dull night. Every line of the poem, as said by Poe himself, exists there for a reason. Needless to say, “The Raven” is rather a musical piece that creates a supernatural and dark atmosphere that makes a reader shiver with anticipation and uncertainty. Even though the poem made Poe popular in his lifetime, it did not bring him any financial success – he was paid only \$9 for its publication. E. Poe struggled throughout his life to make a living, and mysteriously died on the streets of Baltimore in 1849 when he was only 40 years old.

American poet, already mentioned above, James R. Lowell was convinced that the poet had an important mission as a *prophet* and critic of society. However, “A prophet is not without honor, except in his own country, and among his own kin, and in his own house.”⁵ Indeed, although Poe was famous in the US, he was not as nearly sensational there as in Europe, especially in France and later in Russia. The works of E. A. Poe were a significant influence and the source of many tropes and images for symbolists while sickliness and a gloomy invitation to reverie attracted decadents. There was a cult of Poe in France created mainly by C. Baudelaire, S. Mallarmé, E. Hennequin who published Poe’s literary works in France. In Russia, the obsession with American writer was mostly attributed to Valery Brusov and Konstantin Balmont who regarded Poe as their contemporary, kindred spirit. The literary works of Edgar A. Poe built a bridge between his own American identity and a lot of different cultures that could engage in dialogue disregarding the zigzags of history. He was also one of the first writers to develop the genre of both detective fiction and horror which had a huge impact on international literature.

Although Poe opposed Transcendentalism and ridiculed writings of transcendentalists as “metaphor – run mad⁶” or “mysticism for mysticism’s sake⁷”, I will have to put him and Walt Whitman, who incorporated the views of Transcendentalism in his works, in the same box with the name “The key elements to understanding American culture” on it. **interesting turn!** Most famous of Whitman’s creations “Leaves of Grass” does not provide a space for questioning the

role he played in shaping American culture and literature as a whole. Democracy, individualism, freedom – one of the American values – all found their place in the works of Walt Whitman. Whitman himself has been described as the first “poet of democracy” meaning that he was able to write in remarkably American character. The spirit of a dignified soul overfills each line of an epic “Leaves of Grass” celebrating life, humanity, nature. “Resist much, obey little,⁸” can be a motto of the whole American civilization: the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, suffragette movement, civil rights movement define the history of the US and they were and are aimed at one thing – liberty. “You cannot really understand America without Walt Whitman, without ‘Leaves of Grass’...” argued M. Costelloe, Whitman’s close friend and a political activist. Whitman’s comprehensive themes – the individual, the nation, the body, the soul, everyday life, and work – reflect the foremost principles of the American founding. When fighting for freedom, literature can aid a lot. Books tell us stories we could never see ourselves. Frederick Douglass used to be a slave in Maryland, but then he managed to escape and become a leader in the movement which sought to end slavery in the US – abolitionism. He wrote several autobiographies (“Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American slave” published in 1845, “My Bondage and My Freedom”, published in 1855) which were influential in promoting abolitionism as they proved to the wide audiences that slaves were able to function as independent American citizens and “even” produce such eloquent pieces of literature.

American literature helped shape American culture. We can see that in works of prominent American writers who expressed their truly unique perspective of the world. W. Irving, J. F. Cooper, R. Emerson, N. Hawthorne, H. Longfellow, E.A. Poe, F. Douglass, W. Whitman, H. Melville, M. Twain, and other notable writers are what America is. It is people, a spirit of freedom, great struggle, fear, love, it is all those things we see in those creations. American literature assists us, non-Americans, in understanding what Americanism is and what it is all about. In my point of view and experience, people rarely pay attention to the literature of the country they may be interested in or, on the contrary, they despise. It is worth digging into the culture of a country, literature, in particular, to grasp a handful of knowledge about it and its people. Books can tell us stories of distant lands and foreign people, and sometimes we can ourselves in those images, we can see the same things we are experiencing. Literature makes sure we stay united but also unique. This is similar to the spirit of the vast lands of the US. By reading what people who spent their lives in America truly felt is an irreplaceable opportunity to see how America was built, brick by brick, voice by voice. **Super!**

Over the course of a semester I spoke on various topics such as E.A. Poe's poems, The Leatherstocking Tales (The Last of the Mohicans in particular), abolitionism, etc. Besides, I also prepared 5 presentations:

- Cinema adaptations of N. Hawthorne's 'Scarlet Letter', where I showed some extracts from the films of 1926 and 1936 and a trailer of a 1995 adaptation;
- The influence of Poe's poetry upon Russian symbolism, which was my personal favorite; I spoke about Balmont' and Brusov's translations of Poe's literary works and how Edgar Poe affected the whole symbolic movement in Russia;
- Walt Whitman & Oscar Wilde, where I spoke about their meeting and Oscar's essay 'The Gospel According to Walt Whitman';
- The Royal Proclamation of 1763 presentation seemed to me to be the most important one I made during the course;
- Ambrose Bierce, one of the most famous journalists in the US who fought in the Civil War and created realistic stories about the terrible things he saw on the front line.

The course also helped me see clearly how presentations could be effectively used in the learning process. I have learnt a lot when I actually devoted some time to searching the Internet and spoke about what I found to at least 8 other people.

List of sources:

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3. Graham's Magazine (1841). Review of New Books, Volume 18.
4. Graham's Magazine (1839). Review of New Books, Volumes 5 – 6.
5. Mark 6:4
6. Hayes, Kevin J. (2002). The Cambridge Companion to Edgar Allan Poe, p. 16. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
7. ibid. p. 15
8. W. Whitman. (1891). Leaves of Grass, p. 15. The Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia