American Literature
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Prepared by: Meredith Francis and Andrew Koch

Overview

*American Literature* is a peer-reviewed academic journal published by Duke University Press. First started in 1929, every issue features articles on American authors from colonial to contemporary times. The journal articles are not limited to literature; they also feature many different types of American writing. There is no one theme or focus to the articles in the journal other than the overarching theme in American literature. *American Literature* has a broad focus, with writers that examine literature using many different schools of literary thought.

The journal has two major sections. The first section is comprised of academic articles discussing various topics of American literature. The second section features critical book reviews. There are also two smaller sections at the end of the journal. The “Brief Mention” section includes short summaries of new editions and reprints of books, collections, anthologies, and other academic books. There is also an “Announcements” section that informs readers of various awards and opportunities within the literary community. This often includes awards given to writers that have been published in *American Literature*.

In each issue, the journal may feature a couple of related articles, for example, two different articles both discussing some element of Herman Melville’s literature. But most of the articles span different topics and different critical perspectives.

Recent Trends

Recently, *American Literature* has incorporated a variety of criticism that examines American history through different cultural perspectives. Some of the articles suggest the typical Historicist or formalist reading of American literature. However, every article is different. Different journal articles utilize different theoretical apparatuses. Feminism, African American criticism, and environmentalism all make an appearance in various issues of *American Literature*. It also discusses many different cultures and minorities in American literature, such as black, Jewish, Asian, Arabic, and LGBT.

Usually each edition in recent years features a traditional canonical author (either in an essay or in a review of a book about the author). For example, Melville, Poe, Faulkner, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Thoreau, and Emerson are frequently discussed authors. One edition from March 2013 includes an article entitled, “Deep Thought, Shallow Aesthetic: Reading Surface Meaning in Thoreau.” It is not uncommon to find more than one article about the same author in one edition.
Lately, popular topics seem to include essays discussing race relations in America depicted in literature, as well as critical reviews about war. In the same March 2013 edition, a book review discusses a recent book, *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes* in coordination with other books discussing portrays of black Americans as heroes. So within the same edition there is both a piece of the traditional canon and a more contemporary review. Furthermore, this review illustrates one of the recent trends in the journal: including more contemporary pop culture, like comic book figures.

In keeping with American history and literature, another recurring topic in *American Literature* is war. The articles range from the Civil War and Hemingway’s portrayal of World War I, to the Vietnam War and Post-9/11 America. Though the journal still incorporates the traditional canon, recent trends suggest it is beginning to include more contemporary concepts, authors, and events that shed light on the American experience.

**Representative Article**

An example of this journal’s commitment to survey broad trends in American literature is a review published in Sept. 2013 issue. Hillary Chute’s “9/11 and the Literature of Terror/After the Fall: American Literature since 9/11” reviews the two publications listed in the title, which are notable works in the academic field of American literature released in the years following 9/11. Chute uses them as the basis for defining a new field of “9/11 literature” and comparing and contrasting what the works are saying about American literature in a post-9/11 world. Furthermore, Chute retrospectively evaluates their effectiveness in defining “9/11 literature” and how the event affected American literature at large. Like the journal’s broader mission, Chute in her article identifies certain themes that emerge from American literature and places them in an historical context, namely in the psychological after-effects of an event like 9/11 and how that trauma might be reflected in literature. Based on these emerging themes, she herself classifies a new subsection of American literature that is distinctly “9/11” literature that emphasizes certain themes and images while deemphasizing others. For example, Martin Randall and Richard Gray, the authors of *9/11 and the Literature of Terror* and *After the Fall: American Literature since 9/11*, respectively, both identify 9/11 literature by a “hybrid” form and language that reflects the global nature of 9/11 and contrasts with preoccupations with domestic perspective and literary realism. Chute comments that in order to more acutely define “9/11 literature” in the future, the field of study must reevaluate this idea of “hybrid” literary devices. As a result, this review essay, like the journal, studies trends in American literature and evaluates the effectiveness with which these trends reflect the American experience and vice versa.

**Recommendations to Students**

Students may want to have some limited knowledge of American history, as the journal often considers literature in light of various historical events. Without having a basic knowledge of the historical context in which literature is being examined, students might not fully appreciate the journal’s methodology. In a similar vein, students should also be aware of some of the American authors and pieces of literature that are traditionally considered “canonical.” The journal often publishes articles that provide commentary on these “canonical works” and how they relate to each other and to American literature in general. Students may also want to take advantage of the
article’s occasional author spotlight, as issues with focus on a particular writer will often consider the same work from a variety of critical perspectives. These varying insights can be helpful to students who are trying to form a holistic understanding of a text. Because of *American Literature*’s broad treatment of trends in American literature, students should take care to include a variety of synonyms in their search terms. For example, while some articles might extensively cover an author’s use of “diction,” they might not necessarily discuss “voice” or “language,” and not including these synonyms in the search terms may exclude such an article from results.