

Trends in English Literature of 21st Century

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As the 21st century dawned, many young writers—and even some who had fuelled the Latin American Boom—grew disenchanted with the status quo. This program profiles the careers and the potential of literary artists at the forefront of the region's emerging narrative trends. Addressing the influence of the Crack and McOndo movements—as well as an increasing overlap between cinematic and literary concerns—the program studies the work of César Aira, Ricardo Piglia, Sergio Pitol, Juan Villoro, Fernando Vallejo, Roberto Bolaño, Jorge Volpi, Alberto Fuguet, Edmundo Paz Soldán, Marosa di Giorgio, and Pedro Lemebel. Some language may be offensive.

The 2000s (decade) saw a steep increase in the acceptability of literature of all types, inspired by the coming-of-age of millions of people who enjoyed the works of writers such as C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien in their youths. Neil Gaiman, for instance, one of the decade's most popular writers of speculative fiction, cites Tolkien, Lewis, and G. K. Chesterton as his three biggest influences growing up. J. K. Rowling admits to being heavily influenced by Lewis as well. Philip Pullman's gritty and controversial young adult *His Dark Materials* trilogy, written and published in the late 1990s, increased in popularity and was more widely read during the 2000s (decade). The popularity of Lewis, Tolkien, Pullman, and Rowling was spurred on by movies which proved to be some of the biggest of the 2000s (decade). The 2000s (decade) also saw the popularization of manga, or Japanese comics, among international audiences, particularly in English-speaking nations. Many famous books like Harry Potter series were converted into movies. Books on wars, guides for exams, myths, etc. were frequent sellers in this decade.

Some books were written in simple English and works of old writers

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were translated into language that was easier to understand. Mythology was converted into graphic novel form to build interest among young readers. Today, in the 21st century, people write as never before—in print and online. They thus face three challenges that are also opportunities: developing new models of writing; designing a new curriculum supporting those models; and creating models for teaching that curriculum. It's time for them to join the future and support all forms of 21st century literacies.

Translations played an important role in mediaeval Welsh literature bringing chansons de geste into popular literature and translations from Latin provided literary Welsh with new religious and philosophical vocabulary and laid the basis for a new formal register. Literary translations through the 19th and 20th centuries brought foreign influences to the attention of Welsh writers. Simon Armitage's *Sir Gawain and The Green Knight* (2007) harmonises the original author's northern English dialect with his own.

Born of a moment when CDs and personal computers were just becoming common and Ronald Reagan was in office, postmodernism as a concept was evolved to explain the way in which large-scale transformations in Western society since the 1960s had in turn transformed the arts. These arguments were hugely influential in literary studies, where critics posited that novelists like Thomas Pynchon, Toni Morrison and Don DeLillo had broken with the modernist tradition in key ways—for example, through their investment in popular literary forms—in order to reflect the changed world in which they were writing. For most critics, postmodern fiction” became the synonymous with contemporary fiction.

In the current moment, however, the most important writing on postmodernism is twenty years old and its bearing on present-day America increasingly in doubt. From the war on terror to YouTube, from globalization to reality TV, 21st-century American culture has transformed in ways that were unimaginable in the late 1980s. For literary critics, these changes raise pressing and complex questions, such as, what relationship exists between new fiction and recent transformations in

American economics, politics and media? How are 21st-century novelists imagining and interrogating the changed political and cultural landscape in which they write? What formal and thematic trends make 21st-century fiction unique? Humans are hard-wired to be storytellers, but storytelling itself has been transformed by the shift from paper to the screen as the assumed final destination for human expression.

This shift in the default technology for human expression has occurred around the stunning act of violence that inaugurated the beginning of the 21st century: the attacks on September 11th, 2001. Accordingly, they will consider how the technological change and the launch of The War on Terror together have altered both the how and the what of literary expression. Their ultimate goal to consider what forms literacy, “the literary,” and aesthetics take in post-9/11 literature. As is the case in my fall “Intro to Apocalyptic Literatures” course, this course will be conducted in a way that blends lecture and discussion.

American literature has had a vibrant, ever-changing history. When the first English settlers came to New England the main source of literature was the personal narrative. Until the Civil War much of the writing being done in the United States still followed a Puritan-religious-or European style. As life and the times changed reliance on the Bible and peer approval began to fade. Literary movements emerged and transformed American writing. Now in the new century more trends will emerge, new controversies will arise and fuel a generation of people who want to be heard. What are these new trends? How have these trends been influenced by past literary movements? As in the past, it is apparent that controversy will fuel present and future writers. Controversy is a key factor in all of the movements in American literature.

Mark Twain, who is often said to be the father of the American voice, used it to spawn a countrywide contempt for the rich and the prejudiced. Ethnic minorities used personal injustices and history to show that the white man was not always justified in his actions. Women writers were a controversy in themselves, and used their gender as a tool to

empower other women. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries there were several influential literary movements: realism, naturalism, regionalism, modernism, the Harlem Renaissance, feminism, and postmodernism. These traditions are still popular writing styles, but with so many of them the defining line between each becomes blurred as writers venture into more than one style. These movements are a break from the tradition that was created by each preceding generation.

For many years, whenever a new collection of "American literature" was released there was a gaping hole in its pages: the part that should be filled with stories, poems, essays, and excerpts written by the multiple ethnic populations that exist within the U.S. borders. As early as the 1970s literary acceptance arrived to African American, Latino American and American Indian writers. American literature is still integrating the works of other nationalities such as East Indian Americans, Asian Americans, and those of Middle Eastern descent. American literary values are being forced to change as these cultures and other movements such as gay pride and global awareness are gradually being accepted by more and more people.

The question remains: what will the current generation add to American literature? A few of the most popular trends in the twenty-first century have crossed over from the late 1990s. Feminism has taken on a new approach in humour as can be seen by novelists Janet Evanovich and Sophia Kinsella, both of whom have written separate series built around the antics of women trying to make it in a man's world. There is also the ongoing fascination with the mystical and magical. Harry Potter is possibly one of the most popular series written in this century or the last. In fact, many speculate that J.K. Rowling's series has boosted reading among children worldwide: "She [Rowlings] and Harry [Potter] brought us together as readers in a way we hadn't been for some 165 years" (Kirkus 12). What then is there left to write about?

Having a human quality is necessary to literature-the struggles, beliefs, victories and failures of the American people are the truest depiction of the United States. It is of little surprise then that ethnic literature has become as popular as it is. African American literature extends as far back as the late 1860s. However, it did not receive much attention until

Booker T. Washington came into the spotlight. Washington represented one end of the spectrum of African Americans. He portrayed the black population as a kind, loving group of Americans who did not hold slavery against the United States. At the other end of the spectrum was W.E.B. Du Bois, a man who spoke of the anger of the black people and demanded equality (Lauter). In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries it is the African American woman's voice that is being heard. Women like Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, and Nikki Giovanni are speaking out as women of color.

Not only do these African American women write about what it means to be black, but they write about their lives as American citizens; all three have won awards and written autobiographies; all three have been honoured by the NAACP, which was co-founded by Du Bois. What is important about these women is their contribution to American literature. They have emerged from the stereotypical roles of black women into household names. Both Angelou and Giovanni are known primarily as poets and Morrison as a poet, novelist, and essayist. African Americans are proud of their heritage and want to share their experiences, stories, and talents. The change in ethnic writing since the 1860s has been extensive for African Americans. After the Civil War African American literature was about reconstruction of the South, then it changed as a call went up for retribution. This was followed by the demand for equality.

Now literature produced by African Americans is a celebration of what the culture has transcended since coming to the United States as slaves. African Americans often depict themselves, especially in contemporary literature, as family oriented, comical, and as a self-confident race. While African Americans have had a long history in American literature, they are not the only ethnic group creating a niche in the literary world. One of the fastest growing literary minorities is Latin Americans. In his article "Between Tradition and Innovation" Edmundo Paz Soldan discusses the changes in Latino literature and what current challenges Hispanic writers are facing in the twenty-first century: "Lost in a world of mass media, in a storm of digital images and frequencies, we struggle to make ourselves heard" (16). With all the forms of technology that have emerged in the last two decades it is a

challenge for any writer to keep the public's interest. Soldan encourages writers, whether they be of Hispanic heritage or not, to continue their efforts in the form of the novel. "Through the novel, one can explore in greater detail the human conscious as well as subconscious by dialoguing with and transcending our historical context" (17).

With this advice, Soldan goes on to discuss the biggest challenge for writers: the lack of new material because people fail to change with the times. "Traditions that do not constantly renew themselves become stagnant. There is nothing healthier for a culture than an attitude of recognition of the great artistic works of the past, coupled with a playful irreverence, and a constant rejection of that same past" (18). It is important for any writer, no matter their cultural background, to adjust to society, change, and growth. Yet, this seems to be especially difficult for certain minority groups.

Latino Americans are caught in a snare between their heritage and the modern loss of culture that is very popular in the United States. A Hispanic heritage is rich with culture, traditions, gender roles, and stereotypes. What Soldan is urging Latino writers to do is remember the past without missing the present and embracing the future; keep the colorful clothes, the unique accents of the language, and the values of the culture alive, but incorporate the essence of contemporary times, individuality, and self-expression into the writing. In *Multilingual America* Alide Cagidemetro writes of the importance of language and the fact the use of one's native tongue helps a person define himself as an individual with something unique and special to offer. The lack of recognition of heritage in accounts of American literature is a crucial point in Cagidemetro's work. "The notion of the "cultural island" of each language group is furthermore established precisely by the omission of any relationship between literary expression and American historical context" (xii).

The latest trend among Latino writers is the merging of both cultures—their American background and their ancestry. Among these writers are Demetria Martinez, a poet, and Sandra Cisneros, a novelist. Martinez focuses much of her writing on the struggles to be both American and Chicano, as well as the confusion of trying to be both at different times instead of at the same time. Sandra Cisneros, famous for her novel *The House on Mango Street*, incorporates the strong, surviving spirit of Latino-

American women into her work and illustrates the humorous, often sarcastic, mannerisms of street-smart Latinas (Renner, 44). Both of these minority writers use the many aspects of their culture to make their writing have an authentic appeal. Their contributions to American literature are vast, even if their work sometimes goes unrecognized as literature.

Like Latino writers, American Indian writers are caught between the traditional and modern worlds. "Native American" literature was established in the twentieth century. Often it was focused on the injustices the American Indian tribes had suffered from the U.S. government. In the twenty-first century the narrative is changing into stories of regaining lost cultures. Most of the tribes found within the United States were forced to assimilate to white Christian ways. Now the younger generations are trying to reconcile their native cultures, traditions, and languages with the contemporary world they are living in. Authors like Elizabeth Cook-Lynn and John E. Smelcer believe it is important to give credit to their tribes for the stories they tell, because they are often based in the myths and legends of their ancestors (Seeds 134). When asked what he believed contemporary Native American literature was influenced by Smelcer said: "American Indian literature speaks of current socio-political and socio-economic conditions, of the loss of identity, and frequently of the loss of languages and traditional values and beliefs (Seeds 138).

The accounts of American literature often misrepresented American Indian writers and their works. As appreciation of American Indian literature grows, the American people will fully accept the written works of all American tribes as true literature. American Literature is more than Mark Twain, Ernest Hemingway, Edgar Allan Poe, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman. There are also the remarkable writers of ethnic backgrounds: Charles Chestnutt, Alice Walker, Lucy Tapoanza, Zora Neale Hurston, and Janice Mirikitani. Each of these ethnic writers deliver something different in their works. Chestnutt focused much of his writing on the hardships of the light-skinned Negro shortly after the Civil War. Walker, famous for The Color Purple, wrote actively of the continuing ordeals for African Americans in the United States. Tapoanza, a Navajo poet, uses the imagery of the Navajo reservation and her native traditions in her writing and yet keeps it relatable to people of all nationalities.

Hurston was something of an early feminist as well as an African American female writer. She used dark humor to make her characters

Yet, many writers are doing just that. As Brian Hanley, a critical essayist, writes: "When writing about a campaign from the past, scholars look at a variety of sources-amongst the more valuable are official war records, memoirs, and contemporary news reports." John Keegan published *Iraq War* in 2004 in which he discusses the military tactics and operational warfare, as well as the state of Iraq prior to U.S. invasion (Hanley, 362). The United States Government is not being attacked purely for its involvement in the Iraqi War. There is quite a bit of controversy surrounding the American people and the government for being wasteful of fossil fuels and greedy in their need for the best that technology has to offer: bigger and better vehicles, larger televisions, cell phones that have to be upgraded constantly.

Capitalism in the United States is even outgrowing the country itself as more and more jobs are being outsourced to other countries. Perhaps many people would not consider writing that concerns fossil fuels, economy, and ecology to be literature, but it is nevertheless being written about and is very much the source of controversy throughout America. Many writers are taking an aggressive approach to discussing the current circumstances of the United States and the harmful effects overuse of fossil fuels and a lack of concern about the environment are having on the country. According to Jacobs these are the controversies that will continue to arise during the twenty-first century. When asked about what trends she wants to see grow more in this time period Jacobs responded with: "Social justice. It doesn't matter if it's people, obviously they are the first concern, but the environment and animals are important, too."

The government may be a main target in American literature when it comes to "social justice," but more commonly the people who are suffering are the subject of this type of writing.. The hardships of the people living in the U.S. have always been a main issue in American literature. In the early twentieth century "wage slavery" and a call for socialism became the controversial fuel that drove Upton Sinclair to write *The Jungle* (Lauter 606). Such topics continue today as minimum wage remains low and living expenses high. Many writers, like Sinclair, use partial-fiction, stories similar to real events, to illustrate the more deplorable living and working conditions in the United States. Other emerging trends that follow these same general lines include such topics

as: the high-drop out rate in American high schools, the lack of financial ability to go on to college, and the welfare system in the United States.

In fact, it seems that a new call for socialism is at work, as is expressed by journalist Manning Marable in his article "A New American Socialism." Marable discusses the flaws of past socialist movements and how it needs to be reorganized in order to be effective in the United States. "...we should examine the practical problems confronting American working people and racial minorities and respond with a series of political interventions that actually empower the oppressed." He goes on to discuss that the people have a voice, whether they be feminists, anti-racists, minorities, or of the gay community-everyone has an opinion and therefore a voice. Anti-government literature is not a new trend, but the issues behind the anger and dissension have changed with the times.

As minority writers, GLBT literature, and anti-government campaigns gain support and encouragement another new trend is emerging. Global literature is one type of writing that is still, as yet, obscure, but gaining in strength and numbers. The interest in other cultures is growing in the United States. Bollywood, an Eastern Indian themed style, has emerged across the media forums. Music, movies, and television shows are catching on to this trend. While literature surrounding this is slow to emerge, it is sure to catch up. Also, social awareness of the hardships going on in other countries is becoming more and more important to Americans, especially to the younger generations.

For the generations who lived through both of the world wars there seems to be a common distrust of people of Japanese and German heritage; those who grew up during the era of the Korean War followed by the Vietnam War a general anger is still held for Korean and Vietnamese Americans. It is a trend to distrust and accuse those whose nationalities have been at war with the United States. However, with global literature this strong distrust has been broken in the younger generations. After the attacks of September 11, 2001, it is amazing that there is not more anger and suspicion of all people of Middle-Eastern descent. Of course there is a fear; however it does not seem as rampant as the apprehension of Japanese Americans was during World War II.

Global interest is picking up and is being written about. Whether it is the Rwandan incident or a massive natural disaster destroying far-off cities, the American people are paying attention. Survival stories are a favorite theme among readers and movie-goers, as is obvious with such books as: *From Baghdad, With Love* and *Hotel Rwanda*. These two novels are both inspiring accounts of people who chose to sacrifice in order to protect the innocent. *From Baghdad, With Love* is the story of one American soldier's battle to bring a stray dog from Iraq to the United States. *Hotel Rwanda* is the account of a man who gave sanctuary to over 2,000 refugees when the Rwandan government collapsed and chaos reigned. Both novels are based on real event and promote global awareness as well as heroic actions taken by everyday people. While these themes could be found in many novels, it is the true stories that drive global literature and force Americans to take more notice.

Capturing the reader's interest is obviously the most important job a writer has; without the reader, the writing is pointless. What makes this easier on the writer is the fact that there are so many different people populating the United States. Diverse styles, genres, and trends allow for the various tastes that make up the consumers. With every trend that has been discussed in this paper, there is a reader interested in it-therefore providing the need for such literature. At the heart of American literature are the American people and all their diversity. Ethnicity, homosexuality, political standing, environmental awareness, social justice-these are all key factors in emerging American literature, and all are subject to controversy. Literature is a reflection of the life and times of the writers. Controversy is simply disagreement on an issue that has multiple strong feelings from numerous people. Of all the emerging trends there isn't a single one that hasn't been surrounded by some amount of conflict.

Even some of the controversies blend together in emerging literature: gay characters of ethnic descent; an American who protests the Iraq War goes abroad only to discover there was so much he was unaware of in the world and becomes an activist for third world countries. These types of blending of controversial issues are just another type of new American literary trends. There is a history behind American literature

that continues to feed each new generation of writers and the many different types of writers: ethnic, gay, conservative, liberal, feminist, and those who focus their attention globally instead of nationally.

American literature is a broad term for the written works that give the history of the United States a more personal touch. People of every skin color, religious background, sexual orientation, and political standing have a voice, and opinion, and the instinctive knowledge of what their fellow Americans want to hear. Yet, there are only a few who are truly brave enough to confront the issues they oppose and put their names to it. Literature is driven by controversy, but controversy is driven by people who want to be heard.

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American literature occupies its own place in 21st century literature. It has had a vibrant, ever-changing history. When the first English settlers came to New England the main source of literature was the personal narrative. Until the Civil War much of the writing being done in the United States still followed a Puritan-religious-or European style. Literary movements emerged and transformed American writing. Now in the new century more trends will emerge, new controversies will arise and fuel a generation of people who want to be heard. What are these new trends? How have these trends been influenced by past literary movements? As in the past, it is apparent that controversy will fuel present and future writers.

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