

Reading List for Ph.D. Examinations: American Literature 1910-1945

As we know, an almost overwhelming amount of written text reflecting many disciplines and a great deal of visual, musical, and other material apply to the job of acquiring special knowledge in a period field of literary study. One comes to understand that the job is endless, but that does not mean it is hopeless. Our hope is that we learn paradigms and principles, and habits of investigation, that give the specific knowledge we acquire in slow segments a value beyond its immediate relations. Reading a few books or poems or plays or critical essays can, with the application of proper attention and intelligent study, provide the historical or critical perceptiveness that allows us to generalize about the yet unread, to predict the uncreated, and to teach whatever we wish.

The following reading list is offered in the spirit of encouraging the student who would be a specialist or near specialist in this field to build some baselines for a lifetime of learning and teaching (and mainly of teaching herself or himself) to be a wise and useful reader of this part of the human record of what it means to be a writer. Each individual who takes our examinations will build a slightly different structure on this base, but we hope that everyone will begin to make timely, if changing, sense of the body of human work known as American Literature from 1910 to 1945. To do this meaningfully, the student should acquire a sense of all the genres involved and how they appear to have developed, omitting none. This does not mean the eidetic recall of every moment in the development of every text, but it does mean constructing, from competing versions, a reasonable narrative of the flux of expression peculiar to poetry, drama, fiction, non-fiction, and critical discourse during the period under examination. "Construct" is the operative word: that is, to merely read such a narrative may not be enough; the good student will assemble, from found parts, a version on which he or she can then attach individual authors and texts.

General Works: A recent project in the department to create a book purchase list for a British university with which we are developing an exchange turned up hundreds of books written in the last decade on the general subject of American literature or American studies, far too many for the student to read, even without other duties, in a program that last four or five years. So how do you begin? Here are a few suggestions:

1. From your very first course in the program, make a habit to browse the shelves in the library devoted to general works in American Literature (start at PS1). Snatch appropriate-looking books off the shelf and spend a few minutes with them. Photo-copy title-pages and tables of contents that interest you. Make notes on specific chapters or essays you would like to read that link to your study of specific authors and genres.

2. Spend time in the Reference section of the library with general and subject bibliographies.

3. Spend even more time in the Reference section of the library with specific volumes of the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*. Such titles as the following should prove especially useful:

Vol. 2: American Novelists Since World War II

Vol. 4: American Writers in Paris, 1920-1939

Vol. 5: American Poets Since World War I [in two parts]

- Vol. 6: American Novelists Since World War II, second series.*
Vol. 7: Twentieth-Century American Dramatists [in two parts]
Vol. 9: American Novelists, 1910-1945.
Vol. 11: American Humorists, 1800-1950.
Vol. 17: Twentieth-Century American Historians.
Vol. 22: American Writers for Children, 1900-1960.
Vol. 25: American Newspaper Journalists, 1901-1925.
Vol. 26: American Screenwriters.
Vol. 28: Twentieth-Century American Jewish Fiction Writers.
Vol. 29: American Newspaper Journalists 1926-1950.
Vol. 33: African-American Fiction Writers After 1955.
Vol. 38: Afro-American Writers After 1955: Dramatists and Prose Writers.
Vol. 41: Afro-American Poets Since 1955.
Vol. 44: American Screenwriters, second series.
Vol. 45: American Poets 1880-1945.
Vol. 46: American Publishing Houses, 1900-1980.
Vol. 48: American Poets 1880-1945, second series.
Vol. 50: Afro-American Writers Before the Harlem Renaissance.
Vol. 51: Afro-American Writers from the Harlem Renaissance to 1940.
Vol. 54: American Poets, 1880-1945, third series.
Vol. 63: Modern American Critics, 1920-1955.
Vol. 76: Afro-American Writers, 1940-1955.
Vol. 86: American Short Story Writers, 1910-1945.
Vol. 91: American Magazine Journalists, 1900-1960.
Vol. 103: American Literary Biographers, 1st and 2nd series

These volumes generally have useful summary introductions and bibliographies in addition to the individual subject essays. The author essays have excellent primary and good secondary bibliographies. Many of the volumes also have supplemental essays on various topics of literary interest within the period; they ought not to be missed.

Many fine scholars have researched and written the essays in these books. Certainly specialist and non-specialist students alike need to see how this large-scale reference work continues to re-define what is American Literature and to provide excellent resources for American literary scholarship. To be used with these volumes, or as supplementary material for specific interests, are the relevant "Documentary Series" volumes from the DLB; the "Concise Series"--*The Twenties, The Age of Maturity*--that cover American literary culture from 1917 to 1941; and the DLB "Yearbooks," which add to or revise material in specific volumes listed above and also contain obituaries and useful essays and documents on a variety of topics.

Types of General Works

- Eric Foner and John A. Garraty, *The Reader's Companion to American History* (1993)
Richard Ellmann and Charles Feidelson, Jr., *The Modern Tradition: Backgrounds of Modern Literature* (1965)
Emory Elliott, et al. *The Columbia Literary History of the United States* (1988)
Louis D. Rubin, et al. *The History of Southern Literature* (1986)
Daniel Hoffman, ed. *Harvard Guide to Contemporary American Writing* (1979)
James L. W. West III, *American Authors and the Literary Marketplace Since 1900* (1990)

Types of Bibliographies and Other Guides to Research and Criticism

- Facts on File Bibliography of American Fiction 1866-1918* (1993)
Facts on File Bibliography of American Fiction. 1918-1988 (1991)
American Literary Scholarship: An Annual [Review of essays, books, etc., of special use to students of various periods of American Literature] (at least volumes for the previous decade)
Jackson Bryer, ed., *Sixteen Modern American Writers: A Survey of Research and Criticism, Vols. 1 and 2* (1973, 1989)
Prospects for the Study of American Literature: A Guide for Scholars and Students, ed. Richard Kopley (1997)

Theory and Special Topics in Criticism

- Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the 20th Century* (1988)
Sacvan Bercovitch, ed., *Reconstructing American Literary History* (1986)
Vincent B. Leitch, *American Literary Criticism from the Thirties to the Eighties* (1989)
Jay Clayton, *The Pleasures of Babel: Contemporary American Literature and Theory* (1995)

Genre Histories and Criticism

- Tice Miller and Don B. Wilmet, eds., *Cambridge Guide to American Theatre* (1994)
Jordan Y. Miller and Winifred L. Frazer, *American Drama Between the Wars: A Critical History* (1994)
C. W. E. Bigsby, *A Critical Introduction to 20th-Century American Drama* (1986)

- Malcolm Bradbury, *The Modern American Novel* (1984)
Emory Elliott, ed. *The Columbia History of the American Novel: New Views* (1992)
Houston A. Baker Jr., *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (1988)

- Hyatt H. Waggoner, *American Poets, From the Puritans to the Present*
Albert Gelpi, *A Coherent Splendor: The American Poetic Renaissance 1910-1950* (1988)
James E. B. Breslin, *From Modern to Contemporary: American Poetry 1945-1965* (1985)

Sally M. Gall and M. I. Rosenthal, *The Modern Poetic Sequence: The Genius of Modern Poetry* (1986)

Alicia Suskin Ostriker, *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America* (1987)

Lynn Keller, *Re-making It New: Contemporary American Poetry and the Modernist Tradition* (1989)

Individual Writers

As a recent controversy regarding the so-called best 100 novels in English demonstrated, "best of" lists are problematical. Nevertheless, at various times certain writers have achieved, even among other writers in their own or other genres, pre-eminence for artistic daring, imagination, moral courage, the fortitude to sustain—even in the face of doubt and defiance and disregard—a career, or some other rare quality. The "specialist" should know such writers well, if only to be able to add to the list when new perspectives, new information, or indeed new works make it possible to re-evaluate writers who have yet to gain widespread appreciation. For the period 1910-1945, the following would appear to belong on this "A" list:

Sherwood Anderson
Willa Cather
John Dos Passos
Theodore Dreiser (for work published within the period)
William Faulkner
F. Scott Fitzgerald
Ellen Glasgow
Ernest Hemingway
Sinclair Lewis
Katherine Anne Porter
Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings
Gertrude Stein
John Steinbeck
Nathanael West
Edith Wharton (for work published within the period)
Thomas Wolfe

Students should know at least two key works by these writers well and have a sense of the achievement of each career.

Additionally, students certainly should be aware of contributions to fiction by the following novelists and short story writers:

Conrad Aiken
Gertrude Atherton

Mary Austin
James Boyd
Kay Boyle
James Branch Cabell
Erskine Caldwell
James T. Farrell
Zona Gale
Susan Glaspell
Zora Neale Hurston
Caroline Gordon
Ring Lardner
Henry Miller
Margaret Mitchell
John O'Hara
Julia Peterkin
Conrad Richter
Elizabeth Madox Roberts
Evelyn Scott
Upton Sinclair
Wallace Stegner (for work within this period)
Jean Toomer
Stark Young

Poetry

Arna Bontemps
Countee Cullen
e.e. cummings
Donald Davidson
T. S. Eliot
Robert Frost
Langston Hughes
Robinson Jeffers
Edna St. Vincent Millay
Marianne Moore
Dorothy Parker
Ezra Pound
John Crowe Ransom
Edgar Arlington Robinson
Muriel Ruykeyser
Wallace Stevens
Robert Penn Warren

**William Carlos Williams
Allen Tate
Elinor Wylie**

Students should know at least five characteristic poems of at least 12 of the above writers and should have at least a passing sense of the careers of all of them. In discussing your examination with the chair of your examination committee, you should develop a reasonable list for the committee to focus on for your questions.

Drama

**Phillip Barry
Marc Connelly
Susan Glaspell
Paul Green
Moss Hart
Ben Hecht
Lillian Hellman
Langston Hughes
Sidney Howard
George S. Kaufman
Charles MacArthur
Clifford Odets
Eugene O'Neill
Elmer Rice
William Saroyan
Robert Sherwood
Laurence Stallings
Thornton Wilder**

The fashions in American theater during this period are very important, along with the rise of film, the development of musical theater, and the rise of radio drama. The student should be guided carefully through the remarkable work of O'Neill but not neglect other currents in live drama that kept the medium alive and sent it out, in diluted form, to every city and even many small towns in America before the advent of television.

Criticism

This was a great era for the literary journalist--part reporter, part interviewer, part critic, part historian of his or her times, and part theorist--and for some aspects of academic criticism. The body of work created by critics during the period is cogate with and important to the body of work created by imaginative artists in fiction, drama, poetry, and humor. The student should be aware of many of its practitioners and of the power, or achievement, of their careers in the literary marketplace.

Newspaper Journalists

Franklin P. Adams
Heywood Brown
Dorothy Day
Arthur Krock
H. L. Mencken
H. Allen Smith
Dorothy Thompson
Alexander Woolcott

Critics

Irving Babbitt
R. P. Blackmur
Cleanth Brooks
Sterling A. Brown
Kenneth Burke
R. S. Crane
T. S. Eliot
F. O. Matthiessen
Lewis Mumford
John Crowe Ransom
Diana Trilling
Lionel Trilling
Edmund Wilson
William K. Wimsatt

The foreword and essays in D1.B 63: *Modern American Critics, 1920-1955* are particularly useful for studying these writers and their context..