

Coming of Age: The Literature of Progress

1800-1840

With the turn of the century, the young republic entered upon an era of expansion and development that can only be described as spectacular. The rapid progress in the settlement of the West (highlighted by Thomas Jefferson's Louisiana Purchase in 1803), the influx of foreign immigration, the growth of cities, and the construction of both canals and government roads were just some of the many features of American progress during the first fifty years of the country's existence. It is unnecessary to attempt a full historical outline of that period of growth and change except to note that, along with this expansive period of material prosperity and growth, our national literature entered upon what we may aptly term its golden age: the age of its best essayists, novelists, and poets—our first true American men of letters.

As European traditions began to give way to the customs of the growing country, both a new culture and a new literature began to take root. Groups of literati, as they liked to call themselves, genuinely interested in the development of a national

literature, created an atmosphere that was conducive to literary effort in cities such as New York, Boston, and Philadelphia. For some reason, however, New York took precedence over Boston and Philadelphia in these first decades of the nineteenth century; the city not only sheltered a coterie of enthusiastic, congenial writers, but also produced one of the century's greatest: **Washington Irving** (1783-1859). Irving was the first among American writers to obtain universal recognition abroad; he is considered by many to be the father of American Literature. Irving's two most famous stories, "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," were published in *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon* (1820). Although the sources of his material were German folk tales, he transformed them into sketches that were uniquely American. Irving's classic stories have become an integral part of America's literary heritage, and they continue to charm and delight readers from around the world.

In 1825, the poet **William Cullen Bryant** (1794-1878) also came to live in New York. The love of nature is the preeminent theme of Bryant's verse, and his characteristic treatment of this theme is in connection with the elemental experiences of both life and death. Bryant wrote his most famous poem, "Thanatopsis," around the age of nineteen. The universality of its theme, its passionless exaltation of spirit, and its rugged yet lofty eloquence place it among the greatest of poetic expressions. Bryant is often called the "American Wordsworth" because his work resembled that of the great English poet; however, Bryant was never an imitator. He was distinctly original in his choice of themes and laid a substantial foundation for the future of American verse.

Although the short life of **Edgar Allan Poe** (1809-1849) was marked by poverty, unhappiness, and alcoholism, he remains one of the most influential and widely read of all U.S. writers. However, despite his popularity, critics have contended more fiercely over Poe's work than that of any other American. Although he is most associated with Baltimore, Maryland

because he died there, Poe moved from city to city and job to job in an effort to support his writing career. While working as both a magazine editor and a literary critic, he wrote poetry (including “The Raven” and “Annabel Lee”), short stories (including “The Fall of the House of Usher,” “The Tell-Tale Heart,” and “The Cask of Amontillado”) and one novel (*The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*). Poe is considered to be the creator of the modern American short story, the detective story, and the type of gothic fiction that paved the way for the mystery novels and horror movies of today. With a career unique in the history of American letters for its brevity, its pathos, and its tragedy, we may safely say that no American writer lives more vividly in the memory of his countrymen than Edgar Allan Poe.