AMERICAN LITERATURE
TRADITION
AND
INNOVATION

I. EARLY AMERICAN LITERATURE

MESEROLE
SUTTON
WEBER
AMERICAN LITERATURE
 Tradition & Innovation

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Preface

Imaginative literature is one of the richest expressions of the human mind, and among the literatures of the modern world American literature is today recognized as perhaps the most dynamic and productive, one of the great artistic achievements of Western civilization. It becomes a pleasure, therefore, as well as a humanistic responsibility to read and to read about this literature, to seek its origins in the writings of the first settlers to colonize the Eastern seaboard of the continent, and to follow its progress and development over the three and a half centuries of its history.

This is the principal purpose of American Literature: Tradition and Innovation: to provide for the modern student a representative selection of the best and most significant American prose and poetry from the beginnings to the present day.

The very richness of our literary heritage creates for editors the special problem of selection. We have tried to solve this problem by establishing strict criteria for inclusion of texts within these volumes. First, since it is our aim to present a freshly considered anthology to represent the range and power of American literature as literature, we have given first attention to major writers, those men and women whose creative imaginations have been the predominant force in shaping the American literary tradition. Second, we have given generous representation to those minor writers who made significant contribution to the literary history of their particular period or in the development of a particular genre in American letters. And finally, to provide fullest indication of the scope and variety of our literature, we have included several “gatherings” of important works by lesser known writers.

The editors have organized these writings into sections, using chronological sequence of authors as the basic pattern but with occasional departure from strict date sequence to achieve thematic unity or in recognition of a basic similarity of approach or response to a current of emphasis among writers of different generations. Thus Jonathan Edwards is placed with Puritan prose writers Roger Williams, Michael Wigglesworth, and Cotton Mather instead of with his chronological contemporary Benjamin Franklin. Titles of sections further underline this principle of organization: Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson, for example, are grouped as “Pioneers of the Modern,” and Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Theodore Dreiser, Gertrude Stein, and Sherwood Anderson form a unit representing the early twentieth-century “Revolution in the Arts.”

The editorial apparatus is designed to encourage a variety of approaches to the literature and to permit optimum use of class time. A brief introductory essay for each section suggests relationships between elements within the section, and the headnote for each author, and for each “gathering” of authors, contains background material the student needs for informed reading of the texts. Each headnote concludes with a brief bibliography of essential books, often with annotative comment. Fuller bibliographical assistance is given in the selective lists of sources included at the end of the anthology. Annotation has been kept to a minimum, while at the same time providing sufficient information to save the student the time of leafing through dictionaries of allusions, quotations, biography, mythology, and the like.
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